



# BROUGHT TO LIGHT

BY THE AUTHOR OF FOOLISH MARGARET



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# BROUGHT TO LIGHT.



## CHAPTER I.

### A DANGEROUS PROMISE.

It was pleasant to Miss Spencelaugh to exchange the blinding glare of the hot May sunshine, through the midst of which she had walked up from the town, for the shaded coolness of the morning-room in which luncheon was laid out, with its vista of greenery in the conservatory beyond, and the low musical splash of a tiny fountain hidden somewhere among the flowers. She had been down in Normanford all the morning, assisting at the installation of a new mistress for the school in which she took so great an interest. Tempted by the fineness of the day, she had chosen to walk both there and back; and now came in, tired, indeed, but with a heightened colour in her cheeks, and an added brightness in her eyes, which made her look thoroughly charming.

She found her uncle, Sir Philip Spencelaugh, already seated at table, immersed in the *Times* newspaper, which had just arrived by mid-day train, and demanded to be skimmed through before luncheon could be discussed in comfort. He beamed on her kindly through his spectacles, and nodded his white head as Frederica entered the room. "A splendid day for the peaches, my dear," he said, and then returned to his reading. Lady Spencelaugh had not yet left her own apartments; and as she was frequently invisible until dinner-time, her absence excited no surprise.

"There's something here that will interest you, Freddy," said Sir Philip, as, laughing one of his dry quiet laughs, he handed the newspaper across the table to

his niece, marking a certain passage with his thumb. Then taking off his spectacles, he proceeded to rub the glasses with his handkerchief, keeping his eyes fixed meanwhile on Frederica.

The passage indicated was among the marriage announcements, and ran as follows: "At Bombay, on 20th March, Captain George Cliffe Barringer, of the —th Regiment, to Euphemia, only daughter of Colonel Sir Charles Patterson, of Bryanstone Square, London." A simple statement enough, but one pregnant with much meaning to Frederica Spencelaugh. She could feel the whiteness that crept over her face as she read; she could feel in her heart a hollow aching pain, as though some vital thread had suddenly snapped, and therewith the gladness of her life had gone out for ever. But without his spectacles, the baronet's eyes were dim, and Sir Philip suspected nothing.

Frederica had a proud and resolute spirit; her uncle evidently expected her to make some comment on the news; and before the pause had time to become an awkward one, she had rallied her strength sufficiently to speak. "I think, sir, it would have been more courteous on the part of Captain Barringer, considering the trouble you have been at on his account, had he written to inform you of his marriage, instead of leaving you to discover it by accident." There was a tremulous ring in her voice, which not all her efforts could entirely suppress. Oh, to get away to the silence and solitude of her own room!

"The service, my dear, that I rendered George was nothing as between friends," said Sir Philip; "and at his age, young fellows detest letter-writing—at least I know that I did. Besides which, he was in love, and therefore not accountable like an ordinary mortal."

What could Frederica do but turn over the newspaper, and make-believe to be suddenly interested in the political news? But the words danced before her eyes, and a wild confusion of tangled thoughts rushed madly through her brain.

"Last time I was in town," resumed Sir Philip, as he



helped himself to the wing of a chicken, "I fell in with my old friend Desborough, whom I had not seen for several years, and who was formerly Colonel of the regiment in which Barringer is now Captain. George's name came up in the course of conversation, and I then learned he was known among his comrades at the mess-table as 'Captain Flirt'—a sobriquet which requires no explanation. But Reynard has got caught at last, probably by some one more wary than himself; and will now, let us hope, meet with the punishment due to his transgressions. The rascal's stay at Belair was happily of the shortest, else there is no knowing what damage those languishing eyes of his might have done to thy poor heart, *ma petite*."

She got away at last, under the plea of a headache, for Sir Philip was inclined to be prosy, and to sit longer than usual over his luncheon to-day—away to her own pleasant little room, which looked out over the great park of Belair, and across the sunny fruitful valley, far into the dim recesses of the hills beyond. She bolted the door, and stood before the window with clasped hands that fell dejectedly before her, while bitter tears overbrimmed her eyelids one by one. Her proud spirit was broken for the time; she was there without fear of witness, weeping for her lost love.

Some ninety or a hundred years before the opening of our story, the heir of the Spencelaughs had chosen for his bride a noble Spanish lady of Old Castile; and many traits, both of person and disposition, had come down to Frederica from her lovely ancestress, whose portrait by Sir Joshua, was one of the chief ornaments of the gallery at Belair. The oval face, the delicate, clear-cut features, the pure olive complexion, through which the rich blood mantled so warmly on the slightest provocation, were common to both of them. Both, too, possessed the same large black liquid eyes, through which looked forth a soul keen, restless, and loving; and the same free proud pose of the small thorough-bred head, crowned with rich heavy coils of raven hair, which, in the case of Frederica, were shot through with a golden arrow, to keep them in their

place. A heavy necklace of opals, set in dead gold, encircled Miss Spencelaugh's slender throat; and her delicately-tinted dress, of some light summer material, set off by its harmonious contrast the full measure of her dusky loveliness.

Frederica's April shower of regretful tears for her lost love was soon over. "Fool that I am," she cried, "to weep for the loss of that which was never worth having!" and brushing the last of her tears impatiently away, she proceeded to light the wax taper which stood on the table, and from it the heap of fancy shavings with which the fireless grate was filled. While these were still blazing swiftly up the chimney, she went into her bedroom, and taking up a book of devotions which lay on the *prie-dieu* that occupied one corner of the room, she opened it at the spot where a faded white rose lay between the leaves—a white rose, withered and dried almost to tinder, but which, only one short half hour ago, was cherished as a treasure beyond price. Her lips curved into a smile of bitter disdain as she looked on it now; and there was a dangerous glitter in her eyes, which Captain George Cliffe Barringer, had he been there, would scarcely have cared to encounter. Carrying the open book in her hands as though it held some noxious insect, she went back to the flame, into which she shook the withered rose, looking on in silence while it dropped to pieces and shrivelled up to white ashes in the heat. She had no letters nor any other love-token than this one poor flower; and when that was gone, she felt as though the last frail tie which bound her to George Barringer were indeed broken for ever. With the same hard proud look still on her face, she rang the bell, and ordered her mare, Zuleika, to be got in readiness, while she proceeded to put on her riding-habit and hat. The air of the house seemed to stifle her; she wanted to be away, out on the great breezy headlands, with the far-reaching sea before her eyes, where it swept outward, unconfined to the dim blue edge of the horizon.

Down the long avenue of the park, under spreading branches of beech, and chestnut, and strong-limbed

oak ; through pleasant little Normanford, lying warm and sleepy in the hot afternoon sunshine ; away over wide stretches of upland ; past great Creve Tor standing up white and solemn, scarred with the thunders of a thousand years, with the little river brawling far below ; along the white chalky high-road, that went zigzagging in and out among the green wooded hills, rode Frederica Spencelaugh swiftly, followed at a respectful distance by Bevis, the groom.

All the pleasant familiar features of the landscape were lost upon Frederica to-day. Her mind was far away, living over again in memory that sweet holiday-time of love, that one brief golden episode of her young life, whose story she had ever since been whispering to her heart, but which must never more be told again. How well she remembered that day, but two short years ago, when her uncle, returning from town, brought to Belair a tall, handsome stranger, who was introduced to her as Captain Barringer, the son of an old friend, encountered accidentally in London ; and what a different complexion her life had taken from that hour ! There had been no lack of suitors for Miss Spencelaugh's heart and hand, either in town or country, for she was the greatest heiress in all Monkshire, and a beauty beside ; but up to that time she had moved on her way "in maiden meditation, fancy free." By what subtle process Captain Barringer had contrived to steal away her heart before she knew of the loss, she herself would have been least able to explain. There were no other visitors at Belair during his stay ; and having the whole field to himself, he had set himself down, in his lazy, resolute fashion, *pour passer le temps*, to win the love of the niece of his father's friend.

It was, however, a conquest unsuspected by every one but the object of it, and all the more dangerous to Frederica's peace of mind in that the captain's system of love-making precluded any vulgar confession on his part. A pressure of the hand, gentle but full of meaning ; a glance from those wonderful eyes of his, which said "I adore you" with far more emphasis than mere words

could have done; a whisper in her ear as she sat at the piano; a voice delicately modulated, which could lend to words otherwise commonplace a meaning intended for her alone—these were the only tokens by which Frederica had learned that she was beloved; but for her they were full of sweet significance.

Captain Barringer's stay at Belair was brought to a premature close by an imperative summons to join his regiment in India. Any but a very observant spectator of the parting between him and Frederica would have characterised that ceremony as a piece of polite frigidity; but it had occult signs of its own, unnoted by the world, in that tender lingering pressure of the hand; in that one flashing glance of love from the soldier's dark luminous eyes, artfully veiled next moment under their long lashes; in those two little words, "Dinna forget," whispered under the breath, and instinct with a precious meaning of their own. And then he was gone.

"Dinna forget!" Would she ever forget him? whispered Frederica to herself. No; never—never!

Two uneventful years had come and gone since Captain Barringer left Belair; but neither the distractions of half a season in London (town did not agree with Lady Spencelaugh's health), nor the quieter pleasures of country life, had dulled the edge of Frederica's memory. Day after day, she lived over again in thought the words, the looks, the tones, of the gay young soldier; and without being in the least melancholy or lovelorn, she clung with all a woman's devotion to the fetish she had set up in her own heart, saying to herself, times without number, that it must be good and true because it was so beautiful. She heard of her idol frequently, but not from him; certain law proceedings, which the baronet had kindly consented to watch in the interest of his young friend, necessitating frequent communications between the captain and Sir Philip. The letters of the former never concluded without some message to Miss Spencelaugh, which the baronet always delivered with perfect good faith in their humorous unvaracity; but wherefrom Frederica con-

trived to elicit a deeper meaning than the mere words themselves seemed to convey. In one of his earlier epistles, Captain Barringer had declared his intention of selling out at the end of three years, and coming home to settle: an intimation which, to Frederica's ears, could have but one interpretation—then would his love, hitherto unspoken, reveal itself in words, then would he claim her as his own for ever.

But it was all over now—the bright dream which she had cherished with such tender faithfulness. Love's little comedy was played out; the lamps were extinguished; the curtain had come down with a run; and the chill gray daylight of reality was poured over the scene of so many vanished illusions. In the first sharp pain of her loss, she thought herself more deeply stricken than she was in reality; she knew little of the gentle power of Time to heal far worse wounds than hers; but deemed that all her life must henceforth be as blank and dreary as she felt the present to be. Her woman's pride was deeply wounded to find how easily she had allowed herself to be fooled by one whose only object had been to while away a few idle hours. But she held her crushed heart bravely, and uttered no plaint; and never had her eyes shone more brightly, nor her dark beauty flushed to a rarer loveliness, than on that sunny afternoon when she rode seaward from Belair, with the dearest hopes of her young life quenched within her for ever.

A strong tide was rolling magnificently in when Frederica reined up her mare on the summit of the great rock known as Martell's Leap. She took off her hat, and let the breeze play among her hair, and listened to the roar of the waves as they shivered on the beach three hundred feet below; while her eyes followed dreamily in the wake of an outward-bound ship, whose white sails gleamed ghost-like through the haze that veiled the horizon a mile or two away. She watched till the ship could be seen no longer, and then turned Zuleika's head inland, and rode gently homeward by way of St. David's Valley, and through the fruitful champaign country that



stretched southward from Belair. Coming up with Sir Philip in the park, leading his cob by the bridle, which had fallen lame, she dismounted and took her uncle's arm, while Bevis turned off in the direction of the stables with Zuleika and the cob.

"Your roses are quite brilliant this afternoon," said the old man gallantly.—"Oh, been as far as Martell's Leap, have you? Far better than dawdling in the house, my dear; only be careful you don't let Zuleika take you too near the edge, or the catastrophe that gave its name to the place might unfortunately be repeated. Let us rest here for a minute or two; I have something particular to say to you, and I could hardly have a quieter spot than this to say it in."

Frederica's heart sank within her; she foreboded but too surely what it was that her uncle wished to say to her. They had left the main avenue of the park, and had taken a by-path through the shrubbery which would bring them more quickly to the house, and had now reached a little secluded nook among the greenery—a semicircle of softest turf, planted round with evergreens, with here and there a rustic seat, and in the midst a tall terminal figure of Hymen in white marble, placed there by some previous owner of Belair, to make sacred the grove where he had wooed and won the lady whom he afterwards made his wife.

The baronet and his niece sat down on a curiously-carved bench, shaded by an immense laurel from the rays of the western sun. Sir Philip sat without speaking for a minute or two, tapping his boot absently with his riding-whip—a tall, white-haired, handsome old man, but very frail and delicate-looking: with manners that were marked by a certain kindly, old-world courtliness of tone not often met with nowadays.

"You remember, Freddy," he began at last, "my speaking to you, some time ago, respecting the union which I wished to bring about between my friend Duplessis and yourself? You have not forgotten what passed at that time?"

"I have not forgotten, uncle."

"That is well. I forbore to press the subject because I saw that it was distasteful to you, but none the less has it dwelt in my mind ever since, and I cannot rest till I have brought it once more before your attention, and—and, in short, done all that lies in my power to induce you to view it in a more favourable light. I am an old man, and my time in this world is short—nay, my dear, it is as I tell you; I say it calmly and seriously. When spring next comes round, I shall hardly be with you; and my medical man, if he chose, could tell you the same thing. You have been as dear to me, Freddy, as any daughter could have been, and I am naturally anxious to see you comfortably settled, and with a home of your own, while I am still here to look after your interests. Lady Spencelaugh and you have never agreed over well together; and when I shall be gone, Gaston will be master of Belair, and the old house will hardly seem like a home to you. We have no near relatives; and the secluded life which the state of my health has compelled me to lead, has precluded the formation of many intimate friendships. Under these circumstances, the consideration of your future has naturally been a source of some anxiety to me; and to see you happily married, dear, would lift a great weight from my mind. When your father lay dying, he took me by the hand, and said: 'When I am gone, Phil, you must look after my little girl. I leave her in your hands. Bring her up religiously, and when she is old enough, find her a good man for a husband; and may Heaven deal by you as you deal by her!' I loved you at first because you were a wee little orphan and my brother's child, but soon you grew as dear to me as though you were my own; and I have striven to carry out poor Arthur's wishes to the best of my ability."

"Dear uncle," said Frederica, with tearful eyes, "papa himself could not have done more for me than you have done."

"For the last half-dozen years," resumed Sir Philip, with increased earnestness, "I have been hoping that of your own accord, and without a word from me, you

would pick out some worthy gentleman on whom to bestow your hand and heart—and of such suitors you have had more than one or two to whom I could have given you with every confidence. But time goes on, and still Endymion comes not, and to all others Diana is cold as an icicle.”

He took her hand fondly, and stroked it gently between his. “Four months ago,” he went on, “my friend, Henri Duplessis, came to me, and asked my permission to address you on a subject very near to his heart. The permission he asked for I gave him readily, knowing no man to whom I would sooner entrust the happiness of my darling than to him. He spoke to you, and his suit was rejected; and in that respect he only met the fate of others who had ventured before him. For his sake, I departed from the course I laid down for myself long ago—not to interfere by word or look in such matters. I hinted to you how happy it lay in your power to make both him and me, could you see your way clearly to do so. My words distressed you, and I told you to consider them as unsaid. But again, to-day, I venture to plead once more the cause of my friend. Do not mistake me, however; I am not here at his request—he knows nothing of this. He bowed uncomplainingly to your decision, and from that day to this the subject has never been mentioned between us; but, unless I misjudge him greatly, he is not a man whose feelings readily change. Ah, Freddy, if you could but learn to look favourably on him! He is a gentleman by birth and education—generous, handsome, and accomplished; and although he is not a rich man, that fact would not, I am sure, influence your inclinations in the slightest degree. That he is brave, both you and I have had ample proof, else he would not have risked his life to save mine as recklessly as he did that day in the Pyrenees. When a man reaches my age, he seldom makes new friendships; but my heart seemed to warm to Henri Duplessis from the moment my eyes opened on his pleasant face, bent anxiously over me, in that little *auberge* among the hills. Had it not been for his bold spirit and strong arm, they would never have opened

again on earth. Ah, Freddy, Freddy, if you could but learn to like him !”

He was still stroking her hand tenderly between his withered palms. There was a far-away look in Frederica's eyes as she sat, almost as immovable as a statue, gazing out into the violet sky ; but there was a bitter warfare going on in her heart.

“ Would it make you so very happy, uncle, if I were to try to ‘ like ’ Mr. Duplessis a little ? ”

A bright eager light came into the old man's eyes, and his hands began all at once to tremble as he spoke. “ Would it make me happy ? ” he said. “ It would take away altogether my greatest earthly anxiety ; it would cheer and gladden, far more than I can tell you, the few remaining days that are left me in this world, and crown my life with a happiness which I feel would be far greater than my deserts. Ah, darling, tell me that you will do this, and an old man's blessing will follow you through life ! ”

“ I will strive to do as you wish, uncle,” said Frederica.

He drew her face close to his, and kissed her fondly, and then turned away his head, for his eyes were dim, and he wanted time to recover himself.

“ We will go home now, uncle, if you please,” said Frederica.

There was something in the tone of her voice which grated on his ears, and he peered anxiously into her face as he offered her his arm. His heart sank a little, she looked so passionless and cold, with that stony far-away look in her eyes, as though she had caught a glimpse of the Gorgon's head in passing, and already the blight were falling upon her.

“ Were I not as certain as a poor human being can be of anything,” urged he, hastily, “ that this step will ultimately conduce to your happiness, I would not persuade you to take it. Some day, dear, in the years to come, you will look back and say : ‘ My old uncle did what he thought best for my happiness, and his judgment was not such a bad one after all. ’—Henri will

make you a true and loving husband—of that I am sure.”

“Pardon me, uncle,” said Frederica, “but you are putting a far more absolute construction on my words than I intended them to convey.”

He laughed a pleased little laugh. “Well, well; perhaps so,” he said. “Only give Duplessis an opportunity of pleading his suit in person, and I will willingly leave the rest to time.”

They were close to the house by this time, and as they turned a corner of the shrubbery, whom should they see approaching slowly on horseback from the opposite direction but Monsieur Henri Duplessis himself!

“By Jove!” exclaimed Sir Philip. “Why, here comes our hero in person! I suppose you won’t care, Freddy, if — Eh, why, what! where the deuce has the girl got to?”

Frederica, on seeing who was coming, had slipped back out of sight. Traversing quickly a narrow side-path through the evergreens, she came, in a few minutes, by a private door into Lady Spencelaugh’s flower-garden, from whence she quickly made her way unseen to her own room.

Having divested herself of her hat and riding-habit, she flung herself wearily on the bed. Both heart and head ached strangely; and she felt just then that it would be well to die, and so end all this miserable coil that was gathering round her life, and from which there seemed no other mode of escape. “Why does the Great Angel always refuse to come to the weary ones who long for his presence?” she murmured to herself. And then she fell to thinking of the promise she had given her uncle—a dangerous promise certainly, seeing in whose favour it was made. And yet, what did it matter? He whom she loved was lost to her for ever, and just then she was indifferent to everything except that one miserable fact.



## CHAPTER II.

## MOTHER AND SON.

ON the same afternoon that the events related in the foregoing chapter took place, Mrs. Winch, landlady of the "*Hand and Dagger*," the principal inn and posting-house in Normanford, drove up to Belair in her little pony-chaise, accompanied by her son Jerry. In the old coaching days, the "*Hand and Dagger*" had been one of the best inns in all Monkschire, noted for its excellent accommodation and moderate charges; but with the advent of railways and the extinction of stage-coaches, its importance had become a tradition of the past. It had now sunk into a common-place country hotel, the ghost of its former self, with an occasional solitary commercial traveller to shudder in the desolation of its great, bare coffee-room; or perhaps a rich family or two for a few days in autumn, who had ventured thus far in search of the picturesque. For the most part, however, it was abandoned to the effete conviviality of the Town Club, which assembled in its best parlour twice a week, to discuss the affairs of the nation in general, and those of Normanford in particular.

Mrs. Winch was a widow of many years' standing. Her husband had been landlord of the "*Hand and Dagger*" during its prosperous days, and she now clung to it in its decadence, all the more tenaciously, perhaps, in that her friends were constantly advising her to give it up, and take a house of less pretensions and fewer expenses. And although these friends were always asseverating—among themselves—that her expenditure was far in excess of her diminished income, and that another year or two must inevitably make a bankrupt of her, Mrs. Winch still went serenely on her way, laughing to scorn all such vaticinations, dressing in silks and satins, and taking her pleasure after her own fashion, as though the "*Hand and Dagger*" were the most prosperous of hotels. She was a person, too, of some consideration up at Belair, and the lodge-keeper took care to touch his hat to her as he opened the gates for

her chaise to enter; as did also the footman, who answered her imperative ring at the side door. Not the servants' door, if you please, but the convenient entrance generally made use of by the great people themselves when there was no company at Belair, and with which Mrs. Jones, the housekeeper, and Mr. Bellamy, the steward, had also a daily familiarity.

"Is my Lady at home, and disengaged?" asked Mrs. Winch of the footman.

"At home, and I believe disengaged, ma'am," answered the man, in the most respectful of tones, as he held out his wrist to assist her to alight.

"Look after the pony, Jerry; I shall not be long," said the landlady to her son, as she shook the stiff folds of her silk dress into their proper form, before following the footman into the house.

Jerry took the reins loosely, and nodded at his mother without speaking. He knew that the pony was quite competent to take care of itself, and his mind, just then, was intent on something else—on a waltz which he had heard a German band playing in the market-place as he left home, and which he had been crooning over to himself ever since. There were a few bars, however, which he could not exactly remember, and no sooner had the door closed behind his mother, than he drew from one of his capacious pockets a long tin whistle, in the management of which he was a great adept, and proceeded to play softly over the tune that was haunting his brain. After several failures and stumblings over one or two difficult passages, he succeeded in playing it through without a blunder. Then he flourished the whistle wildly round his head, and gave vent to a loud unearthly screech of delight—a sort of "Hoo-hoo-hoo!" ending with a bark almost like that of a dog, and which, without further indication, would at once have told a stranger that poor Jerry's wits were not where they ought to be.

Jerry Winch was one of the institutions of Normansford, and known to all its inhabitants both young and old. He was a tall handsome lad of eighteen, with long flaxen hair, and a clear sunburnt complexion; dressed in

a suit of home-spun gray, with a tall sugar-loaf hat of gray felt, battered and weather-stained, the shape of which added not a little to the strangeness of his appearance. His eyes were deep blue, but from their depths there looked out at you a flickering, impish will-o'-the-wisp—sometimes nothing but the imp of fun and laughter, but in his darker moods one that was ready to do any devil's trick that might come first to hand; while irresolution and want of purpose were just as plainly indicated by his sensitive, loosely-hung mouth, and his pointed chin, in which lurked a dimple that many a beauty might have been proud to call her own. As a rule, Jerry was looked down upon by the people of Normanford as a harmless good-natured fool, ready to do an errand for anybody, but lacking the sense necessary for any but commissions of the simplest kind—a simpleton, who, if his mother had not been able to maintain him, must have been thrown upon the parish as one incapable of earning a living for himself. But there were not wanting a few people in Normanford who prided themselves on their penetration, and who were ready to aver that all Jerry's vagaries were not of such a harmless nature as his friends would have people believe; that the imp by which he was possessed was a malignant one, quite capable of bearing a grudge, and of revenging it, too, in its own stealthy devilish fashion. These detractors would whisper mysteriously among themselves, and ask one another who it was that set fire to Farmer Gullbins's ricks, six months after that individual had laid his riding-whip lightly across Jerry's shoulders, as a warning against turnip-stealing—a weakness to which Mrs. Winch's son was much addicted. Who was it, too, these same folk would like to know, that flung the poisoned meat into Squire Wakefield's kennel, and so caused the death of a dozen hounds, a few weeks after Jerry had been bitten in the hand by that gentleman's mastiff, which took that way of showing its objection to being poked in the ribs with a walking-stick? Who, again, was it, they asked, that coming suddenly behind poor Widow Brown one dark night, pushed her off the high

bank into the river, where, but for the merest accident, she would have been drowned, several months after she had threatened Jerry with the penalties of the law for torturing her favourite black cat? These would have been serious questions, had there been any shadow of proof that Jerry was the party in fault; but there being nothing to implicate him in the slightest degree, and his friends being in the proportion of fifty to one as against his detractors, these ugly whispers gradually died out, and his popularity remained as well established as before.

Jerry's tootlings had scarcely come to an end, when the door was opened, and Mrs. Jones, the housekeeper, stepped out, carrying something under cover of her apron. "Well, Jerry, my man, and how are you to-day?" said the stately old dame. Mrs. Winch and she had been bitter enemies for years; but for the half-witted Jerry the housekeeper had always a kindly word.

"His health is quite salubrious, ma'am; with many obligations to you," answered Jerry, with a tug at the brim of his napless hat. He always spoke of himself in the third person, and delighted, when addressing those he deemed his superiors in life, to make use of the longest words his memory could supply him with—though, as his mother used to say, where he contrived to pick them up, was a mystery to every one.

"You could eat a nice cake, couldn't you, Jerry?" said Mrs. Jones.

Jerry burst into his wild unearthly laugh, but checked himself midway, and becoming grave in an instant, touched his hat deprecatingly, and gazed with eager hungry eyes, at the housekeeper's concealed treasure.

"What do you think of that, now? Isn't it a beauty?" and Mrs. Jones flung back her apron, displaying as she did so a round cake the size of a dessert-plate, thickly sprinkled with currants.

Jerry's mouth literally began to water as he gazed, and his eyes went up to the housekeeper's with a wistful pathetic expression, which the old lady had no heart to resist.

"Here, lad, take it," said the kindly old woman; "and if you eat it all, it will do you no harm. Only I hope to goodness, Jerry, that you have got none of them nasty snakes about you to-day. Ugh!" and the housekeeper shuddered, and drew back a step or two.

Jerry paused in his mastication of the first mouthful. "He left all his pets at home to-day, that's what he did."

"I'm glad of it; and if I were you, my boy, I'd chop their heads off.—Bless me, what an appetite the lad has!" and with a hearty good-morning, the housekeeper went back indoors, leaving Jerry to the quiet discussion of his cake. Who no sooner found himself alone, than he gave utterance to a couple of wild "Hoo-hoo-hoo" laughs, then returned, as grave as a judge, to the business in hand, and so went quietly on till the cake was eaten to the last crumb.

Jerry's next proceeding was to partially unbutton his capacious waistcoat, and, inserting his hand into some folds of flannel that could be seen below, to draw therefrom, one after the other, a couple of large vipers, which he proceeded to fondle and play with, as though they were the most charming and innocent pets in the world. "Chop off your heads, my beautiful ones, did the old cat say?" murmured Jerry, while the reptiles twisted themselves about his neck and arms, and seemed to reciprocate his caresses. "Jerry would sooner chop her head off, any day. Dear to Jerry's heart art thou, O beautiful Mogaddo! and not less thou, O lovely Pipanta! Your master loves you both. And to-night ye shall haunt that old hag's dreams. She shall see you twining about her toes, and feel you biting the soles of her feet, and she shall have no power to stir. Jerry wills it so! But nothing worse shall happen to her this time, because she gave Jerry a cake—a beautiful cake! and some day she may, perhaps, give him another. Hoo-hoo-eeh!"

Then Jerry, placing the vipers on the seat before him, took out his tin whistle, and began to play a sweet, quaint old air in a minor key; and presently the reptiles lifted up their heads, and gradually began to sway their bodies to and fro, as though in unison with the tune.



"What a nice, fat, overlapping neck the old hag has!" murmured Jerry, pausing after a time for lack of breath. "Jerry's fingers itched to gripe it. It would be nice, on a dark night, to seize it suddenly from behind, and hear it gurgle, and gasp, and choke—a neck, my beautiful Mogaddo, for which thou wouldst make a charming necklace! And now dance, dance, little ones, while the sun is warm, and your master's heart is glad!"

Mrs. Winch, passing through several rooms and corridors, with all of which she was well acquainted, came at last to that wing of the great house of Belair in which Lady Spencelaugh's private apartments were situated.

"Mrs. Winch to see my Lady," lisped Plush, in dulcet accents, ushering the landlady into an ante-room, the sole inmate of which was Lady Spencelaugh's new maid, seated at her embroidery, who rose and frowned unmistakably at the intruder.

"My Lady is engaged, and cannot be seen," exclaimed Mademoiselle Clotilde, with a strong French accent.—"And you, sir"—to the footman—"never bring visitors here again, without first receiving permission to do so."

"You say that my Lady is engaged. Has she company with her, or is she alone?" said the widow, still advancing towards the inner door.

"That concerns you not at all. I tell you my Lady is engaged, and will not see any one," cried Clotilde, planting herself full before the sacred door.

"Tush! girl; I know what that means," exclaimed the undaunted widow. "She is taking her afternoon nap, and doesn't like being disturbed. But she will always see Martha Winch, let her come when and how she may; so stand aside, and try to remember me when you see me next;" and before Clotilde knew what had happened, she found herself swung a couple of yards away, while Mrs. Winch passed quickly forward into the inner room, and shut the door in her face.

"Remember you, madame!" muttered the French girl between her teeth, as she twisted her fingers

viciously in her black hair. "Yes, I shall not forget you to-day, nor to-morrow, nor next year. What secret is there, I wonder, between my Lady and you, that you have permission to see her at any hour? That is just what it must be my business to discover!"

The demeanour of Mrs. Winch underwent an entire change the moment she found herself in the presence of Lady Spencelaugh, who, roused thus unceremoniously from her afternoon slumber, started up in amazement, and glared at the intruder. Mrs. Winch stood with her back to the door with a deprecatory air, and waited in submissive silence for my Lady to address her.

"Is that you, Martha Winch?" said Lady Spencelaugh sharply. "I think you might have chosen a more appropriate time for your visit; you know how greatly I dislike being disturbed at this hour of the day."

"I should not have presumed to come at this time, my Lady, had I not received some important news, which I felt bound to communicate to you without the least delay."

"I don't care; you might have let me enjoy my afternoon nap in peace: it was unkind of you to disturb me."

"Important news from America," urged the widow in a subdued voice.

Lady Spencelaugh flushed slightly at these words, and her eyes had an anxious expression in them as they sought those of Mrs. Winch.

"Well, don't stand there, Martha," she said more kindly than before, "but come and sit down by me on the ottoman, and let us talk over this news of yours."

Mrs. Winch advanced into the room, and having pressed Lady Spencelaugh's proffered hand with respectful devotion to her lips, she seated herself as requested, and opening her reticule, produced therefrom a newspaper and a letter.

Lady Spencelaugh had been accounted a beauty in her time, and at fifty years of age was still very nice-looking, with a white unwrinkled skin, and a clear bright colour in her cheeks, without the slightest

suspicion of rouge. Her eyes were large, dark, and vivacious, but somewhat frosty in expression; and she had the good sense to wear her own gray hair without disguise or further adornment than those exquisite little caps tossed together for her by the deft fingers of lame Miss Garraway.

Lady Spencelaugh in her younger days had tasted the bitterness of genteel poverty, when, as Peggy Grant, the daughter of a poor Yorkshire squire, she had mended her father's hose, made the pies and custards, and had a sharp eye after the domestic expenditure. That, of course, was before her rich aunt took her by the hand, and brought her out as a belle in London society, where, however, she contrived to play her cards so much amiss that at eight-and-twenty she was still unmarried. She was beginning to despair, when fortune threw a rich widower in her way in the person of Sir Philip Spencelaugh, whom, after six months of patient angling, she succeeded in landing high and dry on the shore of matrimony.

The ambition of Marguerite Grant was satisfied when she became Lady Spencelaugh, and she determined thenceforth to take life easily, and enjoy the full advantages of her position. Several brilliant seasons in London succeeded her marriage—that is, after Sir Philip finally settled in England, which was not till two years later, his regiment having been ordered to India for active service, in consequence of which he was unwilling for some time to sell out. But the rupture of a blood-vessel brought her Ladyship's career to a dismal termination, confining her for many weary months to a sick-bed. After her return to comparative health, she never cared to resume her former position in the gay world of London, two or three weeks in the May or June of each season satisfying all her ambition in that way. The rest of the year, with the exception of a couple of months at some watering-place at home or abroad, was passed at Belair, where she never saw much company; the health of Sir Philip, like her own, being far from robust. Thus it fell out that for many

years past Lady Spencelaugh had considered herself, and had been treated by every one about her, as an invalid. As such she had fallen into an easy, self-indulgent way of life, which she was too old now to change; so, beyond checking the tradesmen's accounts herself, and keeping down the number of servants to the lowest point of efficiency, she interfered in no way with the management of the establishment at Belair. She liked to be nicely dressed, and to have a well-appointed carriage; she liked nice little French dinners, and hothouse flowers, and her after-luncheon nap, and an unlimited supply of new novels, English and foreign. Grant Lady Spencelaugh but these trifles, supplemented by an intermittent rain of mixtures "as before," concocted for her by her favourite Dr. Roach, and, for the rest, the world might wag pretty much as it liked, for any interest she took in its sayings or doings. One son she had, Gaston Spencelaugh, the darling of his mother's heart, who had just left Cambridge, and was now in Paris, for the supposed purpose of perfecting himself in the French language.

A word as to the personal appearance of Mrs. Martha Winch, and we shall then get fairly under weigh again with our story. The landlady of the "Hand and Dagger" was a tall, thin, large-featured woman, in reality nearly as old as Lady Spencelaugh, but her light flaxen hair showed as yet but few traces of age, while her figure was still as lithe and upright as though she were but a girl of twenty. She was a woman of few words, with manners that were grave almost to sternness; and was respected rather than liked by the people of Normanford—a woman of whom it might be averred, that although she had hundreds of acquaintances, it was much to be doubted whether she had a single friend. Albeit, as we shall find hereafter, there were one or two vulnerable places in the widow's coldly-beating heart.

"And now, Martha, for your important news," said Lady Spencelaugh.

Mrs. Winch paused for a moment with her hand on

the letter. "Barbara Kreefe is dead!" she said, in a voice that was almost sepulchral in its solemnity.

"Dead!" whispered her Ladyship, as though she could scarcely believe the news, while a sudden terror leaped into her eyes, and all the warmth and colour died out of her face.

"Your Ladyship has no cause to be alarmed," said Mrs. Winch reassuringly. "Barbara has died as she lived—faithful to the *Secret!*"

Lady Spencelaugh gave a great sigh of relief, and wiped the perspiration from her brow with her delicate laced handkerchief. "Go on," she murmured. "Whose letter is that which you have got there?"

"This is a letter written by Barbara on her death-bed, after she knew that she could not recover, and left by her with directions that it should be forwarded immediately upon her decease. Accompanying it came this newspaper, which contains the notification of her death. With your Ladyship's permission, I will now read the letter, the contents of which are of so singular a character that I could not rest a moment after reading them, but hurried up to Belair at once."

Lady Spencelaugh was busily at work with her fan; it was evident that her mind was ill at ease. Martha Winch got up and turned the key of the door, and closed the French window: and then, going back to her seat, she read, in a low and measured voice, the following letter.

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### CHAPTER III.

#### A DEAD WOMAN'S LETTER.

MULLINSVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS, U.S.

April 5, 185—.

MY DEAR SISTER,—When this letter reaches you I shall be no more. I write it—with much pain and difficulty—on my death-bed; and I shall leave instructions for it to be forwarded as addressed, together with a newspaper containing the announcement of my death, as soon as possible after that event shall have taken place. The painful malady from which I have

been more or less a sufferer during the last dozen years, has struck me down at last. But it was not to write of my own sufferings that I began this letter, but to perform an act of justice—of reparation—which may no longer be delayed. The confession I have to make is a painful one, inasmuch as he who began the deception which I am about to reveal was one whom, in spite of all his faults, I loved—my husband. In the working out of this deception I have been an unwilling agent; and I charge you to make known the contents of this letter to Lady S—— without delay, as what I have to put down here concerns her more nearly than it does any one else.

I need not detail the circumstances which induced Jeremiah and me to leave England, seeing that they are as well known to you as they are to myself, and that you were as deeply implicated in the affair which led to our departure as any one. You are aware that on our arrival in this country we took up our residence in one of the western states, at that time but thinly populated, and at no great distance from the Indian frontier. Here my husband began to practise as a surgeon, and here we continued to live for seven years. But Jeremiah gambled and drank, and we were obliged at last to seek another home in a place where we were unknown. An opening having offered itself in a small town in the state of New York, we proceeded thither; and there we remained for ten years, leading a miserable existence, for Jeremiah's old weaknesses grew upon him, and one by one his few American friends were alienated. I do not write this as imputing blame to the dead, but simply because a plain statement of the truth is now necessary. Our next move was to the spot from which I write this letter, and where my husband died two years after our arrival. I had three dollars in the house the day he died, and owed three hundred in debts; for all the money that had been sent us was gone—who can say whither? Jeremiah himself could not have told. Every remittance, as it came to hand, was required to meet debts that never seemed to decrease. The thought that I should be left destitute preyed heavily on my husband's

mind as he lay dying, and he bound me by a solemn promise not to reveal till after my own death, the deception that had been practised by him for so many years. This he did in order that the income derived from a certain source might be continued to me, and that I might thus be enabled to live in comfort after his decease. That promise has weighed heavily on my conscience ever since it was made, but I have not felt myself justified in breaking it. Since my husband's death, I have lived on the proceeds of my needle, and the sums remitted to me lie untouched at the bank. I have taken steps for having the total amount forwarded to you after my death, for repayment to the sender.

According to the arrangement made before leaving England, my husband was to write to a certain person, through you, three times every year. This portion of the agreement was faithfully carried out by Jeremiah as long as he lived, and by me after his death. Once in every four months a statement was sent you, embracing such particulars concerning the Boy as it was thought you might feel interested in knowing.

The whole of those statements for the last eleven years were false in every particular.

Let me briefly recapitulate their contents. Up to the time that the boy was nine years old, the reports sent you were simple statements of facts. You were duly informed of our safe arrival in the country, and our settlement at Willsburgh; you had ample particulars sent you respecting the child—his health, his stubborn temper, and the progress he was making at school. Every letter gave you the assurance that the recollections of his former life were gradually dying out of his memory, and that, with the progress of time, the Secret was becoming less difficult to keep. This went on till he was nine years old, but after that time the reports sent you were purely fictitious. You were led to believe that the boy, after remaining at school till he was fifteen years old, was put as assistant into a store, where he stayed till he was quite a young man; but that, growing tired of this life after a time, he joined an exploring ex-

pedition that was being formed to search for a new pass across the Rocky Mountains, and that he was never heard of afterwards. Long before the boy was nine years old, my husband began to chafe under the burden that was laid upon him, well paid for the duty though he was. There were various reasons why this should be so. In the first place, Jeremiah was, in reality, a man of timid disposition, despite the daring scheme which, under the influence of a strong temptation, he had so successfully carried out. So long as the lad continued to live with us, he trembled lest some untoward accident should bring the deed he had done home to him—exposure before the eyes of the world being what he dreaded beyond everything. Then, the lad's temper was most stubborn and obstinate; and, despite all the efforts of Jeremiah and myself, he persistently refused to address us as "Uncle" and "Aunt" (the degree of relationship decided upon before we left England), but would stamp his foot, and turn white with passion, when urged on the point. Nay, he would cry that we were no relations of his, but his enemies, who had stolen him away from his beautiful home across the sea; and that when he should grow to be a man, he would have us put in prison for it. As the lad grew older, there was no lack of busy-bodies in the little town to pick up his words, and try to patch them up into a case against Jeremiah. But the boy remembered so little of his former life, and the evidence against us was so weak, that, for my own part, I think we might have defied it with impunity. If Jeremiah would have given up insisting upon the relationship, the lad would have gradually tamed down, and have settled by degrees into the trammels of his new life, and little by little have forgotten all that his memory retained of old days, till his recollection of that time became an utter blank. But Jeremiah was too nervous and faint-hearted to carry out such a scheme; and he hit on another plan, after a time, which would at once relieve him of the boy, and still enable him to draw the extra amount allowed for his maintenance and education.



My husband gave out among his friends in the little town, that the lad's relations had sent word for him to be sent back home to England, and that he was going to take him to New York, and see him safely on board ship. And one wintry morning, he and the boy set off on their journey. My mind misgave me, I knew not why; and all the time Jeremiah was away, I could do nothing but wait, and listen, and weep to think of the poor lad's unhappy fate. I had grown to like him, far better than I knew of, till I lost him for ever. He was so handsome, so generous, so brave, that it was impossible to help loving him. Let me say this much now in defence of his memory—poor, ill-fated child!

At the end of a week, my husband came back alone. I demanded to know what had become of the boy. He refused to tell me. "You have murdered him!" I exclaimed, struck with a sudden fear. "Not quite so bad as that, old girl," he said, with a laugh. "I have not put the young imp out of the world, but only got rid of him; take my word for that. Believe me, once for all, when I tell you that he is quite well and hearty; but further than that you will never know, so you needn't bother more about it." And he kept his word. I did not know then, I do not know now, what was the fate of the boy. When my husband lay dying, I questioned him on the point, but even then he refused to tell me. "I did not hurt a hair of his head," he said; "but what became of him, I will never tell to anybody." And so he died.

I wish to palliate nothing. I say again, that the object of Jeremiah Kreefe in acting as he did was to get rid of all danger of having his misdeeds brought home to him, and, at the same time, to receive the double allowance from Lady S——. But I must do his memory one piece of justice, which you will not fail to represent to Lady S——, when you lay this statement before her. However much he might forget himself in some things—however recklessly he might ruin his worldly prospects—however foolishly he might dissipate the sums sent him from a certain quarter; he never, by word,

deed, or look, gave intimation to the world of the dark secret that lay like a dread shadow on his mind. In so far as that goes, he carried out with strictest honour his part of the compact. Let Lady S—— be further assured that I, too, shall die with my finger on my lips. Her secret is safe with me, even at this dark hour. *It will never be brought to light.*

You now know the truth, as far as my knowledge goes, respecting the fate of poor Master ——. What was I about to write? It is, indeed, time to conclude, for brain and hand are growing feeble alike. Let me again set down, while my mind is clear on the point, that I know absolutely nothing of the poor child's fate from the day my husband took him away, at which time he was just turned nine years of age.

And now farewell. Present my dutiful respects to Lady S——. I trust that she is well and happy. It may be, Martha, that you and I shall meet again. To Infinite Mercy, nothing is impossible. Till that time shall come, dear sister, adieu.—

Affectionately yours, BARBARA KREEFE.

The two women sat in silence for a minute or two after Martha Winch had finished reading the letter. "Poor Barbara!" said Lady Spencelaugh at last; "I am sorry that she is gone; and yet, Martha, I cannot help experiencing a feeling of relief that you and I are now the sole living depositaries of that ugly business. Poor Barbara! she was faithful to the last; so, for that matter, was Jeremiah also, while deceiving me so wretchedly in other things. I would much rather have paid him double the money, and have known the truth. I wonder what he did with the boy. But my rendering myself miserable on that point would do no good to any one. I daresay the young man is well and happy, and filling some inferior position in life to the satisfaction of himself and all around him. I am sure that my best wishes are with him wherever he may be.—You will burn the letter, of course," said Lady Spencelaugh after another pause.

Martha nodded assent, and deliberately proceeded to refold the letter and newspaper. Then, having placed them in her reticule, she rose to take her leave.

"By the bye, Martha," said her Ladyship, arresting the widow with a motion of her fan, "I trust that you have thought over what I said when I saw you last, and have given that odious person his *congé*?"

"I have not, as yet, given him any decisive answer, my Lady."

"You have not! What am I to understand by that? You surely do not contemplate making yourself ridiculous at your time of life."

The widow's thin face flushed, more in shame than anger. "Oh, my Lady, your words are very hard!" she said, turning appealingly to Lady Spencelaugh.

"I certainly gave you credit for more sense, Martha Winch," said her Ladyship, as she rose from her seat, and began to pace excitedly about the room. "I tell you again, as I have told you before, that it is for your money alone that this man is seeking you. The scheme is preposterous; and once more I repeat that, from the day you are married, the Secret will be ours no longer."

"Oh, my Lady, cannot you trust me after all these years?" protested the widow. "I was a wife for twelve years, and when my husband died, he died in ignorance of the hidden bond existing between your Ladyship and myself; and cannot you trust me again?"

"But do you not see, simpleton," responded Lady Spencelaugh, "that this Brackenridge is an altogether different sort of man from honest, simple-minded Job Winch, who cared for nothing so long as the little hoard at his banker's kept increasing from year to year? This man will force the secret from you, whether you are willing or no, and will trade on it afterwards for his own purposes."

"The man is not born that will force it from me against my will," said the widow with energy. "I may like Mr. Brackenridge—nay, I do like him, and may as well confess as much at once; but your interests, Lady Spencelaugh, have always been, and will continue to be,

paramount with me. If the telling of what I know were the price of my marriage with him, I would sacrifice him twenty, ay, a hundred times over, rather than give utterance to a word that could by any possibility compromise your Ladyship. In this thing, pray have faith in me."

"I have every faith in your good intentions," said her Ladyship. "You have been the truest friend, Martha, that ever woman had; but you have never been tried as you will be tried, if you marry this man. I tremble when I think that there is even the faintest possibility of the Secret becoming known to him. But leave me now; I am unequal to further conversation. Come up to Belair this day week, and we will discuss the matter again. Ah! how I wish that man had never made his appearance in Normanford!" Lady Spencelaugh sighed wearily, and her arms fell dejectedly by her side; she looked for the moment ten years older than she had done half an hour before.

Mrs. Winch drew on her gloves. "Has your Ladyship heard lately from Mr. Gaston?" she asked. She knew that Lady Spencelaugh would brighten up at the mention of that name.

"Ah, yes, Martha; I had nearly forgotten to tell you that I had a long letter from the dear fellow yesterday. He seems to be enjoying himself thoroughly in Paris. But I feel it hard that I do not see him oftener. We shall scarcely have him at Belair before Christmas; but when he does come, I hope he won't leave us again till after his birthday. Such a day as I mean that to be at Belair, Martha!" There was a glad smile on the mother's face as she said these words, and while the brightness still lingered, Mrs. Winch kissed Lady Spencelaugh's hand respectfully, and took her leave.

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## CHAPTER IV

### LADY SPENCELAUGH'S HIDING-PLACE.

"No thanks, my dear boy," said Sir Philip Spencelaugh, as he shook Mr. Duplessis warmly by the hand. "I con-

fess that I know no one to whom I would entrust my darling sooner than to yourself. And now go and inform Lady Spencelaugh of your good fortune. She will be pleased to hear of it, for you are a great favourite with my wife. Don't forget that you dine with us to-morrow." And after another hearty shake of the hand, the baronet turned and left Mr. Duplessis standing alone on the terrace, where the two had been walking and talking for the last half-hour.

Mr. Duplessis paused for a moment after he was left alone, a bright, confident smile lighting up his handsome face. "At last!" he murmured to himself. "The prize for which I have so patiently laboured is coming slowly within my grasp. I shall win and wear it as my own before the world. Beautiful Frederica! you do not love me yet, but you shall learn to do so before long, unless my tongue has lost its cunning!" He turned off the terrace, and walked musingly through the shrubbery towards the side entrance on his way to Lady Spencelaugh's apartments. Mrs. Winch was just climbing into her chaise as he turned the corner of the house. Halting behind a screen of laurels, he saw the widow take her seat beside Jerry, resume the reins and the whip, and then drive off at a rapid pace down the park. "Why does that woman come here so often to see my Lady?" he said to himself, as he emerged from his hiding-place. "What can be the nature of the bond that exists between the exclusive Lady Spencelaugh and this commonplace landlady of a country tavern? This is one of those cases where my little Clotilde may prove a useful ally. There may be nothing in it, or there may be much."

A tall, thin, handsome man of eight-and-thirty, this Monsieur Henri Duplessis; with a low broad forehead, aquiline nose, and long drooping tawny moustache; with an ever-ready smile, which displayed to advantage his large white regular teeth; with accurately arched eyebrows, educated to express much either for or against a proposition—an advantage to an economist of words; and having an undoubted air of fashion and distinction. By birth a Canadian, but descended from an old French

family, he could boast a pedigree that would bear the most critical investigation.

Yes, my Lady would see Mr. Duplessis—(he was rarely called “Monsieur” at Normanford or Belair)—so said Plush: and, preceded by that functionary, the Canadian was ushered into the sitting-room of Lady Spencelaugh. Clotilde was in the ante-room, busily engaged with her embroidery, as Mr. Duplessis passed through, and a meaning look shot from the eyes of the latter, which the French girl was not slow to interpret.

“You must lay the blame of my intrusion on Sir Philip, my dear Lady Spencelaugh,” said Mr. Duplessis, as he bent respectfully over her Ladyship’s hand. “He insisted on my coming to communicate a certain piece of intelligence, which he was kind enough to say he was certain you would be pleased to hear!”

“Pray make no apology,” said Lady Spencelaugh, in her most cordial manner. “You are among the few friends, Mr. Duplessis, to whom I am always at home.—You are admiring those roses? Yes, they are certainly very fine. But Jennings always succeeds better with his flowers than his fruit. And now for this news of yours. I suppose I ought not to say that I am dying to hear it; but in a dull place like Belair, where news of any kind is a rarity, the expression would be almost excusable.”

Her Ladyship was sitting on a causeuse, cutting the pages of a magazine as she spoke. Mr. Duplessis had not sat down, but was still bending over the stand of roses on the table. When he spoke, it was in a low, clear voice, in which, however, there was a ring of triumph, which Lady Spencelaugh did not fail to detect.

“My news is this,—that, thanks to the kind offices of Sir Philip, Miss Spencelaugh has consented to look more favourably on my suit than she has hitherto done; that she has, in fact, consented to give me time and opportunity to plead my cause in person.”

“So that all there is now left for you to do, is to go in and win the race,” said my Lady. “Well, I heartily wish you every success; but I warn you that you have

still some awkward running before you. However, my best wishes, and any little assistance I can render, are sincerely yours. Frederica and I have hardly been such good friends as we ought perhaps to have been, though, where the fault lay, I am sure it would be difficult to tell. But I will say this in her favour, that if you succeed in winning her, you may consider yourself a happy man. Whatever little faults of temper or disposition Frederica may have, are as nothing when weighed in the scale with her youth, her goodness, and her beauty."

Now, in all this Lady Spencelaugh was quite sincere. Despite the polite feud, of many years' standing, which existed between herself and Frederica, she still wished well to the latter in a general, indefinite sort of way—for Miss Spencelaugh was far too rich and important a member of the family to be ignored outright. Mr. Duplessis had the good fortune to be a great favourite with her Ladyship; Sir Philip had evidently set his heart on the match; it was desirable that Frederica should quit Belair before Gaston should bring home a bride; and her Ladyship had an inherent weakness for anything that smacked of match-making: all these reasons combined, induced the baronet's wife to yield gracefully to the force of circumstances, and to make a merit of giving her aid to a scheme to oppose which would have been both bad policy and labour in vain. "If Gaston were only a year or two older!" she would sometimes murmur to herself—he was but twenty-one, whereas Miss Spencelaugh was four years his senior. "If the disparity between their ages were not quite so great, they might perhaps have come together of their own accord; and with her fortune and his own, and the baronetcy at no very distant date, what might not my boy have aspired to!" These, however, were but vain day-dreams, as no one knew better than Lady Spencelaugh herself, and she put them from her with a resolute hand.

Mr. Duplessis, in a few appropriate phrases, expressed his gratitude for her Ladyship's kindness, and then

went on to say that there was one feature of the case which he felt some diffidence in mentioning, but it was one that he could not pass over entirely. He would say at once that the point in question was neither more nor less than the great disparity of fortune between Miss Spencelaugh and himself: a disparity which, among many people, might lay him open to the imputation of fortune-hunting. It mattered little, he added, what the outside world might say or think in the matter; but he did hope that her Ladyship would believe in the sincerity of his affection for Miss Spencelaugh, and not attribute his suit to a merely mercenary motive.

"Yes, Frederica is certainly very well off," replied Lady Spencelaugh, musingly, without heeding the latter portion of the Canadian's little speech. "It would have been better for her, of course, in one sense, to have married a man of means equal to her own. But Frederica's opinions are very peculiar and independent, and as she is entirely her own mistress, she must please herself in this matter as in others. She has already declined several most eligible offers, and I believe that money and rank go for so little with her, that she would wed a pauper out of the streets, if he only took her fancy in other respects. Absurd, of course, but a fact nevertheless."

Then there was a little pause, during which Lady Spencelaugh turned over the leaves of her magazine in an absent sort of way. The conversation was beginning to trench on dangerous ground, and Mr. Duplessis felt that a change of subject was desirable.

"By the by," he said, as if suddenly inspired, "I had nearly forgotten to ask whether your new *femme* is likely to prove more serviceable than your last one."

"Clotilde suits me very well indeed," replied Lady Spencelaugh. "She is docile and good-tempered, and remarkably clever with her needle. In fact, I have had no one at all comparable to her since Wilkins left me three years ago; and I am really much obliged to you for the trouble you must have been at to procure me such a treasure."



"The trouble is not worth mentioning, Lady Spencelaugh. I am glad to find that Clotilde suits you."

"French girls are generally so unequal; but, so far, your protégée seems an exception to the rule," said my Lady.—"You are, I believe, somewhat of a connoisseur in precious stones, Mr. Duplessis. Examine this emerald, and then tell me what you think of it."

Lady Spencelaugh opened a small satin-wood casket as she spoke, lined with white silk, in the midst of which gleamed an unset emerald of remarkable size and brilliancy. Mr. Duplessis took the stone out of its resting-place, and examined it in silence for several moments.

"Except among the crown jewels, I have not seen a finer stone than this for many years," he said at last. "It must be worth a little fortune."

"It cost something very considerable, certainly," said her Ladyship, with a smile. "I have a liking—a weakness many people would call it—for precious stones, as I dare say you are already aware. My collection of diamonds and rubies has, I think, been seen by you more than once?"

"Your Ladyship has so far favoured me," answered the Canadian. "Well, if the hoarding of gems be a weakness, it is at least one that has been shared by many royal and distinguished personages, especially where the fear of some future 'rainy day' has haunted their minds."

The Canadian glanced up at Lady Spencelaugh's face as he spoke, and he was startled to see how suddenly it blanched at his words, and what a dark, troubled meaning shone for a moment out of her eyes. "Does she fear that the future holds some 'rainy day' in store for her?" he asked himself, and then fell to examining the emerald again.

Lady Spencelaugh recovered herself instantly. "That may be," she said, with a little harsh laugh; but I do not mean to abdicate *my* throne at Belair, till I leave it for the family vault."

She shuddered as she spoke. Was it because of the natural dread which human weakness feels at the con-

temptation of the last great change? or did it arise from some terrible recollection known to herself alone?

"Such treasures as this should be kept in safe custody," observed Mr. Duplessis. "I hope that your Ladyship's collection is in good keeping."

"In the best of all keeping, Mr. Duplessis—in my own."

"Do I understand your Ladyship to imply that all the valuable gems which I know you to possess, are kept about you personally—that is to say, in your own apartments, and not intrusted to the custody of your banker?"

"That is precisely what I wished to convey. I have a secure place of deposit in my own apartments—a hiding-place discovered by me, and known to myself alone; not even Sir Philip is aware of its locality; where I keep all my little treasures of gems and jewellery, and where they are hidden from every eye save my own. If I kept them at my banker's, I could not see them so often as I might wish to do. They are quite as secure where they are, and ready to my hand at any moment. This hoarding of precious stones is my hobby, Mr. Duplessis; and you must not laugh at an old woman for the indulgence of her whims. It is not, perhaps, quite so sensible as putting one's spare cash into a bank; or buying scrip with it, and getting a good percentage; but so long as I please myself, it is a matter of small consequence to others, and Sir Philip is good enough never to interfere in such trifles. The gems will be there for Gaston after I am gone; and when they are his own, he can either sell them, or have them set for his wife. I am glad you like the emerald; the colour seems to me particularly deep and brilliant."

The emerald was put back into its resting-place, and the tiny casket deposited by Lady Spencelaugh in her *saculet*. Her Ladyship's detail had been listened to by Mr. Duplessis with much attention.

"I need hardly say," resumed Lady Spencelaugh, "that what you have just heard has been told you in the strictest confidence. It would never do for it to be generally known that the mistress of Belair has such

valuables concealed about her apartments. There are plenty of bad characters in the neighbourhood, who would think little of murdering me for the chance of obtaining such a treasure."

"I give you my word of honour," said Mr. Duplessis, earnestly, "that no syllable of what your Ladyship has said shall ever pass my lips to any one."

After a little airy gossip, just dashed with a piquant spice of scandal, touching their common friends and acquaintances, Mr. Duplessis took his leave. He found Clotilde still busily at work in the ante-room. She rose as he entered, and putting her finger on her lips, signed to him to follow. There were no prying eyes about, and they reached her own little sitting-room without being seen.

"Thine eyes ask me a question that I hasten to answer," said Mr. Duplessis, pinching the girl's ear playfully. "Antoine is quite well, and if he did not send his love, it was simply because he did not know that I was coming to Belair."

The Canadian spoke in French, and the girl answered him in the same language.

"Ingrate that he is!" said Clotilde, passionately. "I wrote to him two, three weeks ago, and he has never yet answered my letter. Speak of him no more, Monsieur; I tear him out of the heart which he has wounded so cruelly. Let him marry that English miss with the yellow hair and the cat's eyes—for me, I care not!—Will Monsieur say why he wants me this morning?"

"In one moment, Monsieur will say. But I tell thee, little one, that Antoine does love thee, and that all in good time thou shalt become his wife. He cares nothing for the English miss; thou alone hast his heart. So get that tigress look out of thine eyes; and when the letters come to Belair to-morrow, see whether there be not among them a billet for thee in a writing that thou knowest."

The girl tossed her head disdainfully, but she could not keep back the glad smile that crept over her face as the Canadian spoke.

"And now tell me," resumed Mr. Duplessis, after a pause, "how go affairs at Belair?"

"We are all very good, but, oh! so terribly dull," said the French girl, with a little shrug and a half-suppressed yawn. "There is absolutely nothing to tell. Madame eats, and sleeps, and reads, and drives out, and has her little fits of *migraine*; and all is told as far as she is concerned. Of Mademoiselle, I see scarcely anything. She and Madame seldom meet till dinner-time; between them there is no cordiality. Mademoiselle has a *triste* and weary look in her eyes—a look, my faith! which I know well, and for which there is but one remedy."

"And what is that, Clotilde?"

"That I must leave Monsieur to discover for himself," said the French girl, archly.

"As for the doings of that poor dear Sir Philip, Monsieur knows as much or more of them than I do. But Monsieur does not know how dull it is for a poor French girl to live here, who was born in Paris, and has seen the world."

"Patience, little one! Antoine must cure all that. But see now: this morning there was with my Lady a woman whom I want thee to watch—Mrs. Winch of Normanford. Ah, I see by thine eyes that she is not unknown to thee."

"My faith, no!" said Clotilde, viciously.

"Well, watch and listen every time she comes here. Try to ascertain why she comes, and what Lady Spencelaugh and she have to talk about."

"I had my eyes and ears open to-day when she came," said the French girl; "but she locked the door, and drew the curtain before it, and closed the window. She is very cunning, that Madame Vinch."

"Such precautions merely serve to confirm my suspicions that there is some secret bond between Lady Spencelaugh and her. Be quiet and watchful next time she comes to Belair, and, above all things, try to propitiate her. Never turn any one into an enemy, my child, whom it is possible to gain for a friend. And

now go, and leave me here alone for ten minutes. I have some papers that I wish to look quietly over. I will punch the head of that pig of an Antoine if he does not write thee a long letter this very night."

As soon as Mr. Duplessis found himself alone, he drew from an inner pocket of his coat a flatly-folded sheet of parchment, yellow and mildewed with age and damp, which he proceeded to spread out on the table before him. "I little thought," he murmured to himself, "when I took down that old moth-eaten copy of the 'Essays of Michel Seigneur de Montaigne' from its shelf in the library the other day, that I should find such a treasure as this between the leaves."

The treasure thus found and appropriated by the Canadian was endorsed, *Private Plann of Belair House, drawne for y<sup>e</sup> particular service of Sir Richard Spence-laugh, Bart., by his faithfull and devoted Serrant, Jonathan Binelloss. Aug<sup>t</sup>. 1690.*

Mr. Duplessis was puzzled for some time to reconcile the discrepancies between the house according to the plan and the house as he knew it, a great part of Belair having, in fact, been altered and modernised, and some portions entirely rebuilt. But the east wing had been left unaltered, and in that wing were situate the apartments of Lady Spencelaugh. The Canadian's knowledge of the position of the different apartments soon enabled him to lay his finger on the suite now occupied by her Ladyship; and his finger, following his eye as he traced the different rooms one after another, halted at last at the one now used as a dressing-room, attracted by two words written in a very minute but clear hand. These two words were *Secret Closet*, and the face of Mr. Duplessis flushed as he read them. A star in the margin drew his attention to a foot-note, where he read as follows:

*To open the Secret Closet, press greatly the fifth marble button from the top on the left-hand side of the mantel-shelf, and at the same time turn thrice to the left the small brass knob which will be found hidden behind the central scroll-work.*

"That must be the place where Lady Spenceclough hides her jewels and precious stones," murmured Mr. Duplessis below his breath; "a piece of knowledge which, in the case of certain eventualities, may prove of service to me. Should all go well, and my marriage with Dona Frederica duly take place, I shall be in a position to dispense with this information; in that case, I shall reform, and live strictly on the square. But should the worst come to the worst, why, then, I may be compelled to make use of it. A sad alternative indeed, but if society permits a gentleman to starve, he must revenge himself on society as best he can. Lady Spenceclough little dreams by what a simple accident her secret has become known to me.—But that emerald! my mouth positively waters when I think of it."

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## CHAPTER V.

## ESCAPED.

MR. DUPLESSIS rode homeward through the warm May evening, slowly and musingly. He had done a good day's work, and was disposed to be satisfied with himself and all the world. It was a short three miles from Belair to Lilac Lodge, if you took the straight road through Normanford; but Mr. Duplessis chose, this balmy evening, to take a longer route, that led him through unfrequented country ways, and quiet lanes made shady by the rich foliage of overhanging trees. A genuine spick-and-span cavalier of the modern school, he would have looked far more at home in Pall Mall or the Park, than he did on those lonely Monkshire roads, where there were few signs of life, save here and there a cluster of lime-burners' hovels, or a batch of tired labourers returning from work.

Scarcely twenty months had elapsed since Henri Duplessis was first seen at Normanford, but during that short space of time he had contrived to put himself on the footing of a welcome guest at more than half the best houses in the county. The Spencecloughs had brought him with them on their return from a conti-

mental tour, and it was soon known throughout the neighbourhood that he had been instrumental in saving the baronet's life at the risk of his own. He had come to stay a month at Belair; but before the term of his visit was at an end, he had decided on taking up his residence in the neighbourhood for some time to come. The Monkshire streams were famous for their trout; there was capital hunting in the next county, only a dozen miles away; and there was no scarcity of people worth knowing, at whose tables, thanks to the baronet's introductions, he was a coveted guest. Last, though not least, perhaps, in the estimation of the Canadian, within the circle of his Monkshire acquaintance there revolved some half-dozen young ladies, all rich, and all charming—combined attractions, which act as the lump does to the moth on the susceptible hearts of gay young bachelors (gay and young still at eight-and-thirty) of limited income and expensive tastes. But did the income of Mr. Duplessis come within the meaning of such a term? Nobody about Normanford could exactly tell. All that was known respecting him was, that he was of good family—on that point we may presume that Sir Philip Spencelaugh had satisfied himself; that he had taken, furnished, for a term of three years, that elegant cottage ornée commonly known as Lilac Lodge; that his establishment comprised a couple of women-servants, a groom, and a valet; that he kept two horses, a hunter and a cob; that he was eminently good-looking; that his clothes were of the newest fashion; that he attended church regularly, and was liberal with his money for charitable purposes; and that, finally, he was declared by young and old to be the most delightful company in all Monkshire.

Mr. Duplessis, in his moth-like eagerness to incinerate himself at the shrine of beauty (and riches combined), had selected for that purpose the brightest lamp of all those which lighted up the Monkshire firmament. What his fortune had been so far, we have already seen; and so long as there remained the slightest prospect that he might ultimately succeed in his purpose, the fervency of

his devotion would doubtless remain unimpaired. In this he was not, perhaps, altogether selfish ; for putting aside the fact that Miss Spenceclough was the greatest heiress in the county, Mr. Duplessis was quite capable of appreciating her goodness and beauty, and of estimating them at their full value ; and his affection for Frederica was probably as deep and sincere as it was in his nature to feel for any one, or anything, himself and his own interests excepted. Should circumstances, however, go utterly against him at Belair, he was quite capable, without too much of a heart-ache, of turning his attentions to some other quarter, where they might, perhaps, be looked upon with more kindly eyes—say, in the direction of Miss Cumworth of Cumworth Manor ; or towards the sole daughter and heiress of old Antony Tiplady, the great manufacturer of Easttingham.

Mr. Duplessis coming after a time within sight of Lilac Lodge, while yet some distance away, could see Antoine standing, napkin in hand, gazing earnestly up the road. It was a sign that dinner was waiting ; so Mr. Duplessis shook his horse's rein, and cantered up to the gate. Jock, the groom, was in attendance, and Antoine proceeded at once to serve up dinner.

Lilac Lodge was a small, low, white, two-storied building, with a broad verandah running round three sides of it, and with a stable, paddock, and servants' entrance at the back. From the verandah, a lawn of smoothest turf swept gently down, interspersed with flower-beds of various shapes and sizes, to where a sheltering hedge of laurel and holly shut in the little precinct from the vulgar gaze. The main entrance was through an iron gate, from which a sinuous gravel-path ran up to the front of the cottage ; but there was a side-wicket which was more commonly used.

Mr. Duplessis ate his dinner in solitary state, in his pleasant little dining-room, waited upon by the assiduous Antoine, who rarely allowed any other servant to approach his master. But then Antoine was more than a servant—he was M. Henri's foster-brother and humble friend ; and another friend equally stanch, true, and



devoted to his interests, the Canadian would not have found, had he sought the round world over. He was the faithful depositary of all his master's secrets; he rejoiced in his successes, and sorrowed over his misfortunes, with a sincerity that had no tinge of selfishness in it. Though of the same age as his master, he looked half-a-dozen years older. He had a round, good-humoured, but somewhat sardonic visage, crowned with a mop of short, black, stubbly hair, which stuck out in every direction, and which had further burst out on his upper lip in the shape of a stiff moustache. His cheeks and chin were blue-black, from the frequent use of the razor; and his large flabby ears were ornamented with small circlets of gold. He was very supple and active, and moved about the little house with a stealthy, cat-like pit-pat which was particularly distasteful to the two English women-servants, and added not a little to the dread with which they habitually regarded him. But advancing years were bringing corpulence with them, and Antoine's mind was troubled thereby. Round his neck he wore a black ribbon over a broad turndown collar, and always carried a large old-fashioned silver watch, worn in a fob, with an old-fashioned ribbon and seals. This watch, with its appendages, was Antoine's fetish of Respectability—a word which he held in great veneration. He talked both English and French indifferently well, but the latter better than the former; and it was in the French language that he and his master generally conversed when alone. Finally, the leisure hours of Antoine were devoted to the manufacture and consumption of innumerable cigarettes of a mild nature, and to the perusal of French newspapers of ancient date.

As soon as Mr. Duplessis had finished his dinner, he lounged out into the verandah, where the attentive Antoine had already placed an easy-chair, and a small table with wine and cigars. It was a clear starlit evening, cool and refreshing after the hot day.

"Sit!" said Mr. Duplessis, with a wave of his hand, as he proceeded to light a cheroot; and Antoine, in obedience to his master's wish, seated himself some dis-

tance away on the edge of the verandah, which went down by two steps into the garden.

"Smoke!" said Mr. Duplessis; and Antoine manufactured and lit a cigarette. The two smoked in silence for a few minutes, and then Mr. Duplessis spoke.

"Thou must write to Clotilde to-night, my child," he said; "I promised her that thou shouldst do so. The girl is breaking her heart at thy neglect."

"Yes, Monsieur Henri, I will write, if you wish me to do so," replied Antoine with a grimace. "Ah, bah! what a fool the girl is! She knows I care nothing for her; why, then, cannot she let me alone, and try to forget me?"

"But, Antoine, thou must try to love her."

"Love her, my faith! She has the temper of a tiger-cat. She would put a knife into me before we had been six months married."

"I tell thee, pig that thou art, that thou must make love to her. She is useful to me, and I cannot afford to spare her just yet. As to marrying her, or not, afterwards, that is thy business."

"It shall be as you wish, Monsieur Henri. I will write to her to-night, and tell her that I adore her, that I am her slave for evermore. But there is a little English *mecs*, a miller's daughter, whom——"

"Silence, babbler!" said Mr. Duplessis. "What are thy miserable love affairs to me? Listen, while I speak to thee of something far more important."

"Yes, Monsieur Henri; I attend."

"Before six months are over, I shall be married to the richest and most beautiful young lady in all Monks-shire."

"Ah, Monsieur Henri, but that is indeed good news!" exclaimed the emotional Antoine, as he flung away the end of his cigarette, and rushing up to his master, seized him by the hand, and kissed it several times with fervour. "It is news that makes glad the heart of foolish Antoine. When Monsieur began to grow melancholy, and to lose faith in his planet, did I not cry: 'Courage! The day of good fortune will come at last.' And now

it has come. But Monsieur, when he becomes a great rich milord, wil not forget his poor, faithful Antoine ? ”

“ Never, Antoine Gaudin, while I live, shall thy fortunes be dissevered from mine. Whether rich or poor, we will sink or swim together. But I am no rich milord yet, nor ever may be one, perhaps ; for, as the English have it : ‘ There’s many a slip ’twixt the cup and the lip. ’ ”

“ Ah, no, Monsieur Henri ; I will not believe that. You will marry the rich and beautiful Mademoiselle, and live happily ever afterwards. ”

“ I hope thy prophecy may come true, Antoine,” answered the Canadian, with a laugh.—“ If I could but forget the past,” he resumed, more seriously ; “ if I could but think of it as an ugly dream, instead of the wretched reality it is, how happy I could be ! ”

“ It *is* only a dream, Monsieur Henri,” replied Antoine. It never can be anything more than a dream now. But when Monsieur is married, he will be rich. Money is the seal of silence ; and Van Goost is as secret as the grave. ”

“ Yes, Antoine, if this marriage ever does take place, there is much in my past life that I might well strive to forget. I shall reform, my child. I shall become a model country gentleman ; I shall preserve my game, and convict poachers ; I shall subscribe to the Monks-shire hounds, and study agriculture scientifically ; I shall give largely to the different charities, and never spend above one month out of the twelve away from my estate. ”

“ Oh, Monsieur Henri, but consider how *triste* it will be to live ever among these damp fields ! One can enjoy life in Paris ; one can even contrive to exist in London ; but in the country here, one might as well be a cabbage, for anything there is to see or do. ”

“ Stupid ! dost thou think that when I am married I will lead this miserable sort of life ? Thou shalt see, my friend, what thou shalt see. But should thy days be wanting in excitement and variety, why, marry Clotilde, and, by the garters of Nebuchadnezzar, thou wilt never complain of being dull again ! ”

Antoine shook his head solemnly, and lit a fresh cigarette.

"Thou hast seen the world of men and women, Antoine," said his master, after a pause; "thou art somewhat of a judge of beauty. What is thy opinion of Miss Spenceclough?"

"Oh, the beautiful Mademoiselle!" exclaimed Antoine, with animation, as he drew his shoulders up to his ears, and placed the tips of his fingers over the region of his heart. "How truly charming she is! What eyes! fire stolen from Olympus. What lips! sweeter than Hebe's own. What swimming grace and majesty of movement! Juno's self come down among mortals. What hair——"

"Cease thy heathenish catalogue!" exclaimed Mr. Duplessis, impatiently. "She is beautiful—that is enough. And she is as good as she is beautiful. When in her presence, I cannot help feeling what a pitiful vagabond—what a mean, sorry rascal I am. Can it be possible that she will ever stretch forth a lily hand to lift such a one as me from the nether pit of his own black nature? Ah, no, no; it is not possible!"

Antoine was alarmed; he began to fear for his master's sanity, for the Canadian spoke with an intensity of feeling quite uncommon with him; and then, was it not monstrous for any reasonable being to depreciate himself in that ridiculous way? Antoine crossed over to where his master was sitting, and stooping over him, stroked him gently on the back, as he might have done a sick child. "Ah, Monsieur Henri," he said, "such words frighten me. Do not say them again, I pray you. Your stomach is out of order; to-night you must take two pills before you go to bed. Mademoiselle is very beautiful, without doubt, but neither too beautiful nor too good to become the wife of my dear master!"

"Thou art an excellent fellow, Antoine," said Mr. Duplessis, sadly, as he rose and began to pace the verandah—"but these things are just thy comprehension. I love this girl," he went on—"yes, love her

for herself alone, as I never thought this selfish heart could love any one; and, by Heaven, when she is all my own, I will do my best to make her happy! I will teach her to love me as I love her; I will forget the past; and walking through life with her pure presence by my side, I will strive to——”

Mr. Duplessis ceased abruptly. There was the sound of a footstep on the gravel outside the garden gate. The nimble Antoine disappeared silently among the evergreens; but before he could reach the gate, Mr. Duplessis heard the well-known hail of the country postman, and presently Antoine reappeared with a letter in his hand.

“A pretty time of the night to be receiving letters!” exclaimed the Canadian.

“A break-down on the railway, Monsieur Henri; hence the delay,” explained Antoine.—“From Montreal,” he added in a whisper, as he handed the epistle to his master.

Mr. Duplessis muttered a malediction below his breath; all his finer feelings had been put to flight by the inopportune arrival of the postman; he was his cynical calculating self again, such as Antoine always remembered him to have been. He waited, with what patience he could command, till Antoine had lighted the lamp and closed the shutters. Even then he dallied a while with the letter before opening it, examining the seal and the postmark, and the curious crabbed writing of the direction. When he did open it, it did not take him long to read; but when he had spelt it through to the last syllable, he seemed for a moment or two as though he could not take in the full import of its contents. So he read it over a second time; and when he had made sure that his eyes had not deceived him, he flung the letter across the table, and turning on Antoine with a face from which all colour had fled, he said in a hoarse whisper, “Read!” and then passed quickly out into the leafy solitude of the garden.

Antoine picked up the letter, and read as follows:—

“MONTREAL, May 2.

“Marie has escaped. I am on her track, and hope to find her either to-day or to-morrow. No time to say more. Will write you full particulars by the next mail.”

Antoine having mastered the contents, spread the letter out on the table, and stood with his hands in his pockets, staring at it in blank dismay.

“Poor Monsieur Henri! what a terrible blow for him!” he muttered to himself. “But, bah! why do I frighten myself? She is no match for Van Goost, and without doubt he has coaxed her back again long before this.”

Mr. Duplessis coming in next moment from the garden, Antoine repeated to his master the assurance he had found so comforting to himself.

“It must be so, Monsieur Henri,” he volubly added, as Mr. Duplessis shook his head in dissent. “You know well how crafty and fearless is that Herr Van Goost. Yes, my faith! as bold as a thousand lions, and as crafty as the good Gentleman in Black. He is not a man whom Antoine Gaudin would like to have in pursuit of him! and *La Chutte Rouge* herself will find that it would have been better to stop quietly where she was, rather than exasperate him by a vain attempt to get out of his clutches.”

“It’s like my cursed luck,” said Mr. Duplessis, bitterly, reverting to idiomatic English, “to be bowled out in this style, just at the moment that Fortune seemed to be shining her brightest on me!”

“Ah, Monsieur Henri, do not lose courage, I pray you!” exclaimed Antoine, pathetically. “You have no occasion to fear anything. Grant that *La Chutte Rouge* has escaped—grant even that Van Goost fails to find her. What then? She does not even know whether you are living in Europe or America; much less, that you are snugly hidden away, like a dormouse, in this quiet English retreat, as utterly inaccessible to any search of hers as if you were locked up with the man in the moon. As far as she is concerned, you are dead and buried.”

"Thou dost not know her as well as I do, Antoine, else thou wouldst not speak so confidently. In craftiness and duplicity, Van Goost himself is as a child compared with her. The news that cursed letter has brought me hangs like a millstone round my neck, and will do so till the next mail shall bring me further tidings—either good or bad; for to know the worst would be less intolerable than this suspense."

"But look you, Monsieur Henri, even supposing *Le Chatte* were to discover that we reside in this damp paradise—and by a miracle only could she become possessed of such information—why, even in that case, I do not think she would come near us, or let us know where she herself might be. Would she not rather say to herself: 'Let him go his way, and I will go mine; and let us meet no more on earth?' Say, Monsieur, would it not be so?"

"Do not delude thyself with such an idea, my poor Antoine. She would beg her way barefoot for a thousand miles to wherever I might be, rather than miss the opportunity of blighting me with her hateful presence. But if she does come, let her beware. Let her not try to step between me and the golden apple that is ready to drop into my hand; for I tell thee, Antoine, that I will sweep her from my path at every risk, even though she or I should perish in the attempt!"

"Those are bright brave words," said Antoine, with a meaning smile. As he spoke, he drew a long ugly-looking knife from its sheath, hidden away below his vest, and plucking a hair out of his moustache, he held it up to the light for a moment, and then deftly severed it with the blade.

"Put that villainous-looking thing out of sight," said Mr. Duplessis, with a shudder. "I feel a devil tugging at my heart when I look at it."

"'Tis but a pretty plaything, Monsieur Henri, which I always keep by me," said Antoine, with an evil smile; "a toy, a trifle; but, such as it is, it is always at my master's service—always."

## CHAPTER VI.

## TACTICS AT BELAIR.

WHEN Frederica Spenceclough promised her uncle that she would give Mr. Duplessis an opportunity of pleading his suit in person, she did not see the full danger of the concession she was making; nor was she, indeed, just then in a mood to care for anything beyond the one bitter fact, that she was deserted by the man she loved. As days and weeks passed on, the first sharp agony of her wound began to wear itself away, leaving in its stead a dull aching pain; and, whether sleeping or waking, the constant sense of some great and irreparable loss. Then, too, for the first time, she learned the meaning of the word "nerves." She grew morbid and melancholy, and would sit alone for hours, brooding, ever brooding, and when the ghostly solitude of her own thoughts became utterly unbearable, she would order Zuleika to be saddled, and would gallop far away over the breezy downs, or by the lonely shore, in a vain search for her old joyous self, only to return home weary and dispirited, sick of the glaring sunshine and the rude ocean breezes, in which there was no sympathy with the dark misery gnawing at her heart. But to the world, Frederica was the same fearless, proud-spirited creature she had ever been—clear-eyed and heart-whole; and except that her head drooped a little weariedly now and then, and that her colourless cheek had a slightly worn look, such as had never been there before, there was nothing to tell of the struggle within.

Not many days were suffered to elapse before the rash promise she had made was recalled to Frederica's mind; and although she would have given much to revoke it, yet seeing how impossible it was for her to do so, she was far too straightforward and fearless to shrink from the consequences of what she had done. But she soon gave Mr. Duplessis to understand, and that without saying a word on the subject, that the advantages which he would gain from her promise would be trifling indeed; and had not the Canadian been a man of exemplary



patience, he would probably have been disgusted by the coolness of his reception, and have "cried off" before many weeks were over. But Henri Duplessis was not easily balked when he had set his heart on anything.

His object, after Sir Philip had told him with garrulous eagerness that Miss Spencelaugh had promised "to try to like him a little," had been to seek an interview with Frederica, and with all the warmth and passion, real and simulated, which he could summon for the occasion, to lay himself, metaphorically, at her feet, and, if possible, to wring from her a further promise of one day becoming his wife. But when he saw, one time after another, how persistently Frederica refused to give him the desired opportunity; how, by no scheming, would she allow herself to be left alone with him for a minute; and when at last it dawned on his mind that the promise she had given had been given entirely out of deference to her uncle's wishes, and not in the least degree through any regard for himself; and that if he persisted in these violent attempts at commonplace love-making, he should frighten his bird beyond recall; he wisely determined to change his tactics, and to win his way to her regard through her intellect, before laying siege to the fortress of her heart.

Mr. Duplessis, while admitting the full difficulties of the task before him, never allowed himself to despair. His experience of the sex had unconsciously led him to form such a good opinion of his own qualifications, that he was not troubled with any doubts as to his ultimate success in the present instance. He was acute enough to perceive, what no one else suspected, that the shadow of some old love still lingered in the heart of Frederica; but he wisely kept his knowledge to himself, trusting to time and his own efforts to pull down the image of his unknown rival, and set up that of Henri Duplessis in its place. From the day on which he decided to change his mode of action, he no longer sought for opportunities of finding Frederica alone. When Lady Spencelaugh, good-naturedly, attempted once or twice to make such occasions for him, he shrank from accepting them, and

seemed unaccountably to have become as shy and retiring as his ladye-love herself.

When, on the other hand, Miss Spencelaugh and he met in the presence of others, and better still, if there were only a third person present, and especially if that third person were Miss Craxton, ex-governess at Belair; middle-aged, snuffy, but still delightfully sentimental, and at present on a visit to her old pupil—then would Mr. Duplessis exert himself to the utmost to dazzle and fascinate Frederica.

Although the richest young lady in all Monkshire, Miss Spencelaugh had seen but little of London society, for the baronet and his wife had lost, years ago, all relish for town-life; and what little company visited Belair was not of a kind to possess much interest for Frederica, chiefly consisting, as it did, of middle-aged country squires and their wives, with, perhaps, an insipid daughter or two, just emancipated from boarding-school. Young gentlemen, wanting neither in manners nor education, were not more scarce in Monkshire than anywhere else; but after one or two of them had tried their fortune with the heiress of Belair, and had been repulsed; and when a rumour ran through the bachelor ranks that Miss Spencelaugh had bound herself by an oath never to marry; they fought rather shy of the solemn dinner-parties at the Hall, and carried themselves and their attractions to quarters where they were more likely to be appreciated. But, indeed, had any of the robust young squires of Monkshire—university-men many of them, with their honest homely country training overlaid with a thin lacquer of London fast life—been foolish enough to enter into the lists with Mr. Duplessis, they would soon have had cause to regret their temerity in so doing. For Mr. Duplessis had a hundred advantages on his side, such as no young man of twenty, however accomplished he might be, could hope to rival. In the first place, there was his age; and a man's age, up to a certain point, if properly managed, is an advantage rather than the contrary in a love-chase, especially if the Diana of whom he is in pursuit has to be

won through the intellect as much as through the heart. Then, again, Mr. Duplessis had the advantage of a wide experience of the world. He had travelled much, and had seen life in various forms; he was an excellent linguist, and had supplemented an originally good education by sundry accomplishments picked up in different countries; and he knew how to present his knowledge in its most attractive guise before others. To all this, add the fact that he was eminently handsome, and that his style was pronounced to be irreproachable, and it will at once be seen that Mr. Duplessis was not without reason on his side when he expressed his firm belief in the ultimate success of his suit.

That the Canadian was possessed of many attractive qualities, Frederica had been made aware from the day on which the Belair party had made his acquaintance so opportunely among the Pyrenees. As time wore on, the friendly bond between the two assumed that easy, bantering, thrust-and-parry character which seems to be educes so naturally from the collision of two bright and well-polished intellects; which is essentially of the world, worldly; rarely or never touching any of the deeper chords of feeling, nor desiring, indeed, to do so; which is very ephemeral, and easily broken, but very pleasant while it lasts; and is, in fact, such a gay and sparkling apology for genuine friendship that many easy-hearted individuals prefer it to the real article, as less troublesome, and by no means so exacting. So long, then, as the friendship between them—if friendship it could be called—moved pleasantly along to light music, so long did Miss Spencelaugh take pleasure in the company of the accomplished Canadian. But at the first whisper of love, the sunlight of laughter died out of her eyes; she turned on him in all her dark and haughty beauty, and shuddered as though a serpent had stung her.

It was not merely that Frederica's heart was already given to another; there was something beyond that—one of those nameless unaccountable antipathies, which caused her whole nature to rise in revolt against the

idea of ever becoming the wife of Henri Duplessis. And yet, in the face of this antagonistic feeling, she had given that rash promise to her uncle! She had given it during the first sharp pain of her bereavement, while utterly indifferent as to whatever might happen to herself: how bitterly she regretted it afterwards, no one but herself ever knew. But when Frederica perceived that all lover-like advances on the Canadian's part had entirely ceased; that he no longer sought for an opportunity of finding her alone; and that his demeanour in no wise differed from that of any other gentleman who visited at Belair; she concluded, not unaturally, that seeing how distasteful his suit was to her, he had silently abandoned it. Grateful to him for his forbearance, she began slowly, and almost unconsciously, to unbend towards him; and by degrees the intimacy between them came to assume its old easy laughing character, which was precisely the point to which Mr. Duplessis was desirous of bringing it, and from which he began to work afresh.

It was the old easy intimacy with a difference, as Frederica was not long in discovering; less bantering and satirical than of yore, but with more of the earnest feeling of real friendship, at least on the part of Mr. Duplessis; and based on a pleasant communion of intellectual tastes hitherto unsuspected by Frederica. It was strange to discover that Mr. Duplessis' favourite authors were hers also. His acquaintance with Dante, and Goethe, and Schiller, exceeded her own; and in English literature, he was certainly much better read than she was. Then there were other happy points of contact between them. Mr. Duplessis, like Frederica, was passionately fond of sketching from nature, and wielded a free bold pencil, which seemed to rub in, with a few easy rapid touches, effects which only by much slow, painstaking study could she adequately shadow forth. What more natural, under these circumstances, than that they should occasionally find themselves among the beautiful Belair woods, sketching some picturesque nook together, with obliging little Miss Crax-

ton to play propriety between them? Then, again, Mr. Duplessis was an admirable amateur musician, and had a clear, ringing tenor voice, which he knew how to use with excellent effect; and music, in such a case, is full of dangerous fascinations, and has tones of hidden tenderness all its own, which can reach the heart that no other language avails to touch.

The health of Sir Philip Spencelaugh waned slowly as the summer advanced, but he still clung as tenaciously as ever to his pet scheme of a union between the man for whom he had contracted so singular a liking, and Frederica. He saw, with a sort of querulous satisfaction, that Frederica no longer displayed any signs of distaste for the company of Mr. Duplessis; and he was only dissuaded from urging his niece to name an early day for the marriage by the Canadian himself. Duplessis knew well that the baronet's persuasions would have an effect precisely the opposite of that which it was intended they should have; that they would utterly freeze those pretty tender buds of liking he saw creeping forth from day to day, and which he hoped, by patient and judicious cultivation, would one day culminate in the perfect flower of love. So the baronet, with some difficulty, was induced to keep his own counsel, and that of Mr. Duplessis, as far as it was known to him. He would sit for an hour at a time with Frederica's hand in his, patting it softly, and murmuring below his breath: "Good girl, good girl," and gazing with anxious eyes into that bright, proud young face, which, when in his presence, always softened into a tenderness such as was rarely seen upon it at any other time.

Beyond the precincts of Belair, the unfounded news spread quickly, emanating from what source no one could tell, that Miss Spencelaugh was positively engaged to Mr. Henri Duplessis, and that the marriage was to take place before Christmas. It spread to Normanford and Eastringham; and thence, in an ever-widening circle, from one country-house to another, till it was known throughout the length and breadth of Monksshire. So, after a time, it travelled up to town, to be discussed

in west-end drawing-rooms, and to be a topic for brief comment at chance meetings in the crush on aristocratic staircases. Such was the position of affairs at Belair, at the time when one of the most important characters in our history made his first appearance on the scene.

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## CHAPTER VII.

### JOHN ENGLISH'S LETTER.

LATE one August evening, a tall stranger stalked into the bar of the "Hand and Dagger," and inquired whether he could be accommodated with supper and a bed. Mrs. Winch having answered him in the affirmative, he went back to superintend the unloading of his luggage from the fly which had conveyed him from the nearest railway station. When that operation was concluded, and a short five minutes had been given to his toilet, he reappeared in the bar, and, at the landlady's invitation, seated himself in the arm-chair by the chimney-corner, pending the preparation of his supper. Would he not like to have a private room? asked the landlady. No, he should prefer taking his meal where he was, provided Mrs. Winch had no objection to his company. Mrs. Winch had no objection whatever, and would do her best to make him comfortable.

Supper was quickly served, and while the stranger was discussing it, Mrs. Winch was enabled to take a mental inventory of his appearance. He was apparently about six-and-twenty years old; very tall—six feet two at least—and strongly built; without an ounce of superfluous flesh, but with plenty of muscle. His skin was very dark, either naturally so, or from long exposure to a hotter sun than ours; his hair was black and crisp, and evidently inclined to curl, but cut too close to allow of its doing so; he had a thick black moustache, and a beard that fell in great rippling waves low down on his chest. His eyes were the same colour as his hair, and extremely bright and piercing; so much so, indeed, that, as the landlady afterwards observed, they seemed to look clean through any one on whom they were

steadily fixed. His features were sufficiently regular and well-cut to be considered handsome by most people ; but it was the general expression of the man that struck you, rather than any one point of detail. There was something noble and leonine about him ; he looked so strong, and yet withal so gentle, that a child would as instinctively have asked him to mend its broken toy, as a bully would have shrunk from the lightning of those terrible eyes, or the silent menace of that iron arm. When he walked, it was with a free swinging gait peculiar to himself ; and in all his movements there was a certain careless dignity which might have graced a Red Indian chief or a sheik of the Desert. As a true sailor always smacks of the sea, so did he seem to carry with him, wherever he went, a fresh, open-air, breezy flavour that was infinitely refreshing. Although he wore no gloves, and was shod in strong boots, he was unmistakeably a gentleman ; and that close though unconscious observer of character, the great Jeames himself, never ventured to treat John English with any but the most profound respect.

Yes, that was his name, John English ; and a good name too, he added, as he volunteered the information over supper to Mrs. Winch. He was not at all indisposed to talk about himself, as the landlady was gratified to find ; for one's curiosity respecting strangers, especially in a little country place like Normanford, ought never to go unsatisfied ; only some people are so stupidly reserved that they never can be induced to talk about themselves or their business. He was a photographer by profession, he went on to say, and was at present engaged by an eminent London firm to go from county to county and photograph the most picturesque and noteworthy architectural features of each shire, especially the houses of the landed gentry, as the basis of a certain great illustrated work which was shortly to appear. He intended to take up his residence at Normanford for a few weeks, as a convenient central spot from which to make excursions to different parts of Monksshire ; and if Mrs. Winch knew of any clean and respectable lodgings

in the little town, he should be glad to receive her recommendation. To-morrow, or next day, he was going up to Belair, to request permission of Sir Philip Spence-laugh to photograph the east wing of the Hall, which—so he had been given to understand—was very old and picturesque, while yet in an excellent state of preservation. And then he got out his portfolio, and proceeded to show the landlady some specimens of what he had already done in other counties. Mrs. Winch was loud in her praises, her knowledge of the photographic art having hitherto been limited to cheap portraits of herself and acquaintances.

By and by, Mr. Brackenridge came in, and was duly introduced to Mr. John English; and the latter seeing before long how affairs stood between the chemist and the widow, discreetly withdrew; and having lighted his well-worn meerschaum, he proceeded to take a quiet ramble through the town, in which, early as was the hour, nearly everybody seemed to have gone to bed. He lingered on the bridge for half an hour, smoking, and listening to the melancholy murmur of the dark stream that ran below, and trying to make out through the starlight the outlines of the different hills, by which the little town was shut in from the world. Then back to the “Hand and Dagger,” and so to bed.

The following letter, written a few weeks after John English's arrival at Normanford, and addressed to his friend Frank Mashiter, at that time staying at Nice for the benefit of his health, is here inserted, as containing his own impressions of certain people with whom the reader has already some acquaintance, and with whose fortunes those of the young photographer himself were afterwards so strangely interwoven.

“MY DEAR FRANK,—“How long is it since I wrote to you last? Somewhere about a month, I believe; at all events, I know that there is a long letter due to you, and I sit down, this wet Sunday evening, to conscientiously work off my arrears. Yes, a wet Sunday evening, in a little country place where I am almost an entire stranger—such is my predicament at present.



"I rejoice heartily, my dear Frank, to find that you are so much stronger than when you left England, and hope, now that the year is so far advanced, that you will stay where you are through the winter, and come back to us, thoroughly rejuvenated, with the swallows in spring. Your account of the old Italian *maestro* and his little household was excellent, and might, I think, be elaborated without much trouble into a tolerable paper for the *Metropolitan*. Send me a full account of what you are engaged on, next time you write. I am afraid, from the tone of your letter, that you are growing too dreamy and transcendental—that you read too much poetry, and see too many dark eyes for your peace of mind. The society of a hard-headed practical fellow like me for a week or two would do you a world of good.

"I wish, *cher ami*, that I possessed your ready pen, your easy flowing style, your happy knack of putting down whatever you wish to say without any apparent effort. To me, writing is hard work; my thoughts move crabbedly; my style is no style at all, but a series of angular jerks without grace or unity of design; my fingers feel far more at home with a rifle between them, than they do when handling a pen. I trust, therefore, that you will value my lucubrations all the more when you consider under what difficulties they are written.

"Why I wish for your pen at this time more than another is, that it might assist me to state clearly certain particulars which I wish to lay before you, without exactly knowing how best to set about doing so.

"I came to Normanford three weeks ago, an utter stranger to the place. I was captivated with it at the first view, and determined to make it my head-quarters for some time to come, especially as I knew there was some good fishing to be had in the neighbourhood, and my work was so far ahead, that I could spare a few half-days without detriment to the interests of anybody. After passing a couple of nights at the only tolerable hotel in the place, I engaged my present lodgings—two rooms *en suite* in the house of a decent widow body, who does her best to make me comfortable. Normanford does not,

I imagine, contain over a thousand or twelve hundred inhabitants, but its situation is more picturesque and romantic than that of any other English town with which I am acquainted. It lies in the hollow of a most lovely valley, three or four miles in length, but nowhere very wide, shut in on both sides by hills wooded to their very summits, which here and there are split as by some great movement of nature countless ages ago. Road and river in many places wind in and out between huge precipices of rock that impend grimly on either hand.

“Every little country town in England has its great man, to whom it looks up with reverence, on whom it is more or less dependent, and who sways its destinies in a greater or lesser degree. Normanford is no exception to the rule. The great man to whom it touches its cap respectfully, not to say obsequiously, is Sir Philip Spencelaugh of Belair—a personage of great wealth and blameless life, who can trace back his pedigree almost to the flood. Although only a baronet, he is quite as important a personage in Monkschire as my Lord Clopford himself, whose title only dates back to the reign of the Second Charles, and whose castle, some dozen miles from here, is the great show-place of the county. The greater portion of the property in the neighbourhood of the town belongs either to the owner of Belair, or to his niece, who is said to be even richer than he is, and who is young, charming, and unwedded. But of her more hereafter.

“Before proceeding to give you an account of my reception at Belair, and the events which followed it, I must go back to the date of my arrival at Normanford, and deal first with certain occurrences, trifling in themselves, perhaps, but possessed of a singular interest for me, as throwing an unexpected ray of light on the great mystery of my life.

“I have already stated that my first two nights in Normanford were spent at its principal hotel, a great rambling place, widely known under the sign of the ‘Hand and Dagger’ (part of the armorial cognizance of

the family at Belair), and kept by a widow of the name of Winch, a tall, angular, hard-featured woman, with slaty eyes, and a most determined-looking mouth. Mrs. Winch is not, however, too far advanced in life to have lost all hopes of matrimony, her 'intended,' who came in, and to whom I was introduced in the course of my first evening, being a chemist of the name of Brackenridge, who keeps a shop in the town. He is much younger than the widow—not over thirty, I imagine—and is a stoutly-built man, with huge sandy whiskers, and a face that would be handsome if it bore fewer traces of premature dissipation, and were less cynically defiant in expression. What his object is in seeking the hand of the landlady of the 'Hand and Dagger,' it is not, I think, difficult to opine; but the widow's eyes are evidently blind to all his imperfections. He seemed disposed to fraternise with me, but beyond the barest civilities, I would have nothing to do with the fellow. He is one of those people to whom I take an antipathy at first sight—it may be prejudice on my part, but I can't help it—and I soon wandered out to smoke a solitary pipe.

"I was just finishing breakfast next morning, which had been laid for me in the landlady's own little snugger, when I heard a voice call loudly outside: 'Jerry! Jerry!' Merely those two words: ridiculous words you will probably call them, but I cannot tell you how strangely I was moved at hearing them. Yes, they thrilled me through and through, and my memory seemed to go back to some far-distant time when I had heard those very words repeated, and that by a woman's voice. I sat for a moment or two like one petrified. Happily, I was alone; there was no one to observe how strangely I was affected. Where and when had I heard those words before? I asked myself the question again and again, but without being able to arrive at any satisfactory conclusion. You know something of the mystery that surrounds my early years, and how anything that seems to touch, however remotely, upon that time has for me an indescribable fascination; and I could only conclude, that to some vague recollection of

that period which still lingered faintly in my memory, was due the sense of unfamiliar familiarity, if I may use such a term, with which the repetition of those two words affected me.

“But who was ‘Jerry?’ I got up from the table, and lighted my pipe, and wandered out towards the back premises of the house, on a voyage of discovery. I walked through the long flagged passage leading to the back of the house without encountering any one, and was just about to enter the yard, when, glancing through one of the side-windows, I saw a sight which brought me to a stand. Sitting astride a wooden bench, placed full in the warmth of the morning sun, was one of the strangest figures I have seen for a long time—a youth of eighteen or twenty, with features that were almost feminine in the delicacy of their outline, but freckled and burnt by the heats of summer; and with long tangled elf-locks, in colour a pale yellow, falling low over his shoulders. On the ground near him was an old felt hat, gray and napless, in shape like a sugar-loaf; and on the other side of him, a steaming bowl of oatmeal porridge, waiting till it should be cool enough to be eaten. But what took my attention most was the singular way in which he was occupied. He was playing one of those long tin whistles, the like of which may not unfrequently be seen among the *gamins* of London, and the music he elicited from it was such as I could not have believed so rude an instrument capable of producing. What the air was, I know not. It was one that I had never heard before—weird and melancholy, and for anything I know to the contrary, may have been improvised by himself. Over the bench in front of him was spread a piece of green baize, on which two large vipers were now placed, which swayed their heads slowly to and fro as he played, darting their long tongues here and there with every movement, and seeming mightily delighted with their master’s shrill music. I stood for three or four minutes a silent spectator of this singular scene. At length, the youth ceased playing, and turned his head to look after his porridge, and as he did so, I saw, with a

thrill of sorrowful surprise, that he was an idiot. No—that is too strong a word; he was what the Scotch call ‘daft,’ and Yorkshire folk ‘soft’—in fact, a harmless simpleton, with three grains of sense in his head to one of foolishness. His eyes told the story of his misfortune at once. Yet they were beautiful eyes, large and bright, but with an expression in them beyond my skill to analyse.

“‘Jerry will catch thee a nice fat mouse to-night, my beautiful Mogaddo,’ he said, apparently addressing one of the reptiles. ‘But as for thee, my little Pipanta, thou shalt go supperless to bed. Thou art getting too lazy to dance to thy lord’s music, and thou must be punished. Hoo-hoo-hoo!’ and he ended his speech with a wild crackling laugh, such as no sane being could have given utterance to, and then fell to work ravenously on his porridge. His two pets coiled themselves up on the green baize, and basked lazily in the grateful warmth of the sun.

“This, then, was the Jerry whose name, when called aloud, had startled me so strangely. ‘Good morning, Master Jerry,’ I said, as I advanced; ‘you seem to be enjoying your breakfast.’ The poor lad started at my sudden appearance, and stared up in my face with a touching, wistful look, as though deprecating any possible anger on my part. ‘Sahib Mogaddo, too,’ I said, turning to the larger of the two vipers, ‘seems to relish the bright sunshine.’ As I spoke, I seized the reptile with my left hand by the tip of its tail, and running my right hand quickly up its back, grasped it tightly with my thumb and finger, just behind the head, and so held it, powerless for injury, whilst its body twisted and untwisted itself rapidly round my arm. ‘I met thy uncle one day on the banks of the Ganges, and thy grandfather among the Mountains of the Moon, and each of them sent thee a message,’ I continued, addressing myself to the viper. And with that I mumbled over a few sentences of Arabic which I had picked up during my travels; while Jerry looked on in silent awe, his nether lip trembling with nervous agitation. Afraid,

apparently, lest I might treat Pipanta in the same unceremonious way, he hastened to seize the smaller viper, and put it away in a box which he drew from under the bench; and I was by no means sorry to deposit Mogaddo in the same place of security. Jerry was evidently disposed to regard me with reverence, if not with absolute fear. That any one should be on speaking terms with his favourites, and introduce himself to them as a family friend, was, probably, something altogether beyond the narrow range of his experience. Where might the knowledge of this mysterious stranger be expected to stop? So, to show the depth of respect in which he held me, he proceeded to favour me with a series of old-fashioned rustic bows, running the open palm of his hand close up by his face, and then bringing it down through the air in a sweeping curve almost to his feet. 'Jerry hopes that your Lordship has salubrity of health this saffron-tinted morn,' said the poor lad. 'He is your Highness's most complaisant and obedient slave. My Lord Mogaddo and his bride, the beautiful Pipanta, are your slaves. We know nothing, and the master, to whom everything is known, holds the key of our destiny.'

What answer I should have made to this high-flown tirade I cannot say, but at this moment Mrs. Winch entered the yard. 'Good morning, sir,' she said. 'I perceive that you are making the acquaintance of my poor boy. Heaven, for some wise purpose, has seen fit to afflict him, but he is none the less dear to a mother's heart. It may be, indeed, that I love him more than I should do were he the same as others;' and the widow bent and kissed her son's forehead fondly. But Jerry was ravenously intent on his breakfast, and seemed to have no attention to spare for either his mother or myself. The widow signed to me to follow her. As soon as we reached her little parlour, she turned to me and said: 'Last night, sir, in the course of conversation, you mentioned that you were a photographer by profession. Would it be too great a favour to ask you to take the portrait of my poor boy some day when you

have a little spare time? It is what I have desired to have a good one, I mean—for a long time. I will pay you whatever you may choose to ask.’—‘I will take your son’s portrait with pleasure,’ I replied (and so I would have done, for it isn’t every day that one has an opportunity of adding such an original to one’s gallery); ‘although portraiture is out of my usual line of business, and I only dabble in it a little occasionally, and that merely for my own amusement. Still, in the present case, I will gladly do my best to give you satisfaction; and as for the expense, we will talk about that some other time.’

‘I was away at Eastringham all that day on matters of business, and did not get back to the ‘Hand and Dagger’ till close upon eleven o’clock. Mr. Brackenridge and I have been talking about photography this evening,’ said the widow to me as I lingered over my last pipe. ‘He tells me that by its means copies of fading portraits may be taken, and that thus the features of those who, when living, were dear to us may be perpetuated for years after the original likeness has become blurred and unrecognisable with age. Will you, sir, kindly tell me whether this is so or not?’—‘What Mr. Brackenridge told you is to some extent true,’ I replied. ‘Pictures can, of course, be photographed, just as any other object can; but the brighter the picture is, the clearer will the photograph of it be; a dim picture will yield but a dim copy through the camera. But you had better let me see any portrait that you may wish to have photographed, and I can then judge better as to its capabilities for coming out well under the process.’—‘I am really ashamed, Mr. English, to trouble you about such a trifle,’ said the landlady, ‘but I have, upstairs, a portrait of my brother, which has, unfortunately, been hung for some time in a damp room, and I now find that the colours are fading rapidly, and that in another year or two it will look nothing more than an unmeaning daub.’—‘Let me see the portrait,’ I said; ‘something can be made of it no doubt.’ The interest I showed in the matter evidently pleased her; she rose with a grati-

fied air, and went to fetch the picture. She came back with it almost immediately, and laid it on the table before me. It was a poor thing enough—a Kit-cat, done in water-colours, in the florid style of art so popular among a certain class about the time that you and I were born. But scarcely had I set eyes on it before *I recognised it as the portrait of a man whom I knew when I was a child*—of a man whose rugged and strongly-marked face I have but too much reason to remember; and the same instant there flashed across my mind the very time, place, and circumstances under which I had heard those two words: ‘Jerry, Jerry,’ called aloud many years ago, the sudden repetition of which had so startled me that very morning. Yes, that man on whose portrait I was now gazing was the very man to whom those words were addressed. The whole scene rose before me in a moment, as clear and vivid as one of my own photographs. Here it is. Daybreak on a bitterly cold morning. A man is riding away from the door of a little house in a little, shabby country town—not an English town—and mounted behind him, with his arms round the man’s waist is a lad of nine—your friend John English, to wit, only his name was’nt John English then. They are riding slowly down the silent street when a shrill voice behind them calls ‘Jerry, Jerry.’ They both look back, and see a white-faced woman standing in the doorway of the house they have just left, earnestly motioning to them to return. But the man only mutters a curse, and digs the spurs into his horse. The sparks fly out of the flinty roadway as the animal springs suddenly forward; and as they turn the corner of the street, the boy, still looking back, sees the woman’s clasped hands flung up suddenly above her head, as though in prayer or invocation; and then she passes from his sight for ever. The man and he ride wildly on for what seems to the lad a terribly long time, till at length the latter drops asleep from very weariness, and is only kept from falling by the belt which fastens him to his companion. When he awakes, it is to find himself in a strange place, and among strange faces, and



to be told that he will never again see the man who brought him, whereat he is not sorry.

"Such was the picture, my dear Frank, which the sight of that faded old portrait brought back so vividly from the dim recesses of my memory. It was all that I could do to retain my self-possession under the keen eyes of the widow, while pretending to be making a close examination of the painting. The beating of my heart, for a minute or two, seemed to deafen me. Strange lights danced before my eyes; the room, and everything in it, except that stern-faced woman before me, seemed to fade into unreality; and it was as though I, John English, were looking down upon some other man, who sat there in sad perplexity, not knowing what to do next. But a question from the widow soon recalled my scattered wits. 'Well, sir, what is your opinion?' she said. 'Do you think that anything like a tolerable photograph can be taken of it?'—'Undoubtedly,' I said. 'A person who understands his business well might, with care, obtain a very fair reproduction.' I said this more to gain time than for any other reason; and my next remark had the same end in view. 'If I remember rightly, Mrs. Winch, you stated that it was the portrait of your brother?'—'Yes,' she said, rather plaintively, 'the portrait of a very dear brother, who died many years ago. My poor boy is named after him.'

"Her boy named after him! If any doubt had previously existed in my mind as to whether my memory were playing me false, these words would have been sufficient to remove it; but even so, I determined to extort further testimony from her, if it were possible to do so. 'Yes, Mrs. Winch,' I said, 'If you will intrust this portrait into my keeping, I will engage to make you a very excellent photographic copy of it. But do you know, the more I look at it, the more it gives me the impression that it is the portrait of a man who walked with a limp—of a man one of whose legs was shorter than the other. Ridiculous, of course, but that is the idea it gives me.' As I said these words, I looked full and unflinchingly into the widow's eyes. Her face blanched to

a dull deathly gray before I had done speaking, while the firm fire of her eyes quailed and flickered, and then fell utterly before my gaze. Her thin lips tightened over her large white teeth; her breath came and went rapidly; and her long thin fingers closed unconsciously over the wine-glass which she happened to be holding at the time, and crushed it to fragments in their convulsive gripe. She got up without a word, and stretched out her arms, and drew the picture to her, like a woman in a state of somnambulism, and then turned and walked slowly from the room. But when she reached the doorway, she stopped. Her head came slowly round, as though it were worked by mechanism, till her eyes met mine with one brief fiendish look of mingled hate and fear, which, if looks possessed the power of annihilation, would have withered up your poor friend on the spot. I saw the widow no more that night.

"I was too much excited to sleep, and sat by the open window of my bedroom, smoking and thinking till day-break. How can I set down, how make you comprehend, even a tithe of what I thought as I sat there? Some vague outline of my history is already known to you, and one of these days I will fill in the details, and colour the picture. Even then, you will but faintly realise my state of mind on that night. I deemed I had found the key that would unlock the dark mystery in which, as in an iron chest, hitherto to me impenetrable, lay hidden the secret of my early life.

"I encountered Mrs. Winch at the foot of the stairs, as I was coming down to breakfast next morning. She looked paler than usual, but her demeanour was as quiet and impassive as it always was. 'You must have thought me very rude last night, Mr. English,' she said, with a smile. 'I believe I actually snatched my brother's portrait out of your hands, and left the room without a word. Pray accept my apology for such ill manners; to explain which, I must tell you, what is well known to my intimate friends, that I am subject to sudden attacks of vertigo, combined with sickness. Feeling the premonitory symptoms of an attack last night, I hastened to

leave the room while I had still some control over my actions. The act of seizing the picture was merely an instinctive impulse to reclaim what I value so highly, and at the moment I was only half conscious of what I was doing. You will pardon me, will you not ?

“What could I do but utter some commonplace phrases of civility that meant nothing? In my secret heart, I believed that the woman was lying to me. Her tone carried no conviction with it. And again, how could I believe her in face of the fact that I had certainly recognized the portrait of the man she called her brother, and that her sudden illness declared itself exactly at the moment when she became aware of such recognition on my part? No—there was certainly something more in the case than was just then visible on the surface; and it was equally as certain that I had made this woman my enemy. In those cold gray eyes, and that set, colourless face, I read a strength of implacability that might well have made a nervous man tremble in his shoes. Happily, I am not nervous, and rather enjoy the fact of having an enemy than otherwise. It is like caviare, and gives a zest to an otherwise insipid *plat*; for, after all, life *is* insipid in this dull conventional England. Still, I think a man had better have six enemies of his own sex, than have one woman against him who has the power and the will to work him harm. (*N.B.*—Do not suppose from this that I am afraid of the widow.)

“‘I think, Mr. English, I heard you mention yesterday that you intended going up to Belair this morning?’ said Mrs. Winch, interrogatively, as she brought in my coffee herself.—‘Such is certainly my intention,’ I replied. ‘If you will permit me, sir, to give you a word of advice,’ continued the landlady, ‘I would recommend you to go, in the first instance, to Lady Spencelaugh rather than to Sir Philip. The baronet is in very delicate health at present, and all power is vested in the hands of her Ladyship, a word from whom to Sir Philip would at once insure the success of your mission. By the by, while I am here, I may as well tell you that Mrs. Jakeway, of Cliff Cottage, has two very nice rooms to

let, which I think would suit you exactly. I intend writing her a note presently, which I will send down by Jerry; and you, sir, will perhaps be good enough to step in as you go through the town on your way to Belair, and see whether the apartments are to your liking.'

"All this certainly seemed very kind and plausible on the part of the widow, but I am afraid I scarcely felt sufficiently grateful for her good offices. In her demeanour towards me there was a sort of insincerity, impossible to analyse, but none the less certainly there.

"When the girl who ordinarily waited upon me came in to remove the breakfast things, she told me that her mistress had just received a telegram, which had been brought express from the nearest railway station, about six miles away, informing Mrs. Winch that her mother was dying, and that if she wished to see her alive she must start by the first train without fail. The girl added, that the news had affected her mistress a good deal, but that the first thing Mrs. Winch did after hearing it was to write and send off two notes, one addressed to Lady Spencelaugh of Belair, and the other to Mrs. Jakeway of Cliff Cottage; and that everything was now hurry and bustle in the house, to enable her to get off in time to catch the train.

"'I have sent a note down to Cliff Cottage,' said Mrs. Winch when she came in, a few minutes later, to bid me good-bye. 'I think you will find the rooms to your liking;' and with that she went, and I saw her no more for nearly a fortnight.

"A note for Lady Spencelaugh of Belair! Was Mrs. Winch, then, on such familiar terms with her Ladyship that she could presume to write to her? But what business was it of mine if she chose to write fifty notes? Probably it was nothing more than a bill for ale or wine supplied to the Hall. And yet, do what I would, I could not get the idea out of my head that the landlady's note had reference in some way to my approaching visit to Belair.

"I found Cliff Cottage without difficulty. It was pleasantly situated on the outskirts of the town, and

formed one of two small semi-detached houses standing quite alone in gardens of their own. The other house, as I was not long in learning, was tenanted by Brackenridge the chemist, whose shop was half a mile away in the town. Mrs. Jakeway was a clean, apple-faced, motherly little woman, brisk and busy from morning till night, with an intense pride in her neat little house, and a pardonable weakness on the subject of chimney-ornaments and anti-macassars, of which articles she possessed sufficient to stock a house six times as large as her own. 'Law bless you, sir!' she said, when I had introduced myself and made known my business, 'why, I had a note from Mrs. Winch only half an hour ago, telling me, I suppose, that you were about to call, and that you were a respectable gentleman. But I can see that well enough by your looks. I've not lived in the world all this time without having my eyes about me; and if the rooms suit you, I shall be very glad, and will do my best to make you comfortable.'

"'But if you have received Mrs. Winch's note, you of course know the contents,' I replied.

"'No, that I don't,' answered the little woman, as sharp as a needle; 'for, as it happens, I mislaid my spectacles this morning, and I might just as well try to fly as to read that scrawly spider sort of writing without 'em. I know the note was from Mrs. Winch, because Jerry brought it. Here it is, sir, and I shall take it as a favour if you will just read it out aloud, and let us hear what the widow has to say. A very decent respectable woman is Mrs. Winch, and everybody in Normanford will tell you the same thing.'

"She held out the note as she spoke. 'But there may be something in it,' I remonstrated, 'intended for your eye alone.'

"'Don't you think anything of the kind, sir,' said the little woman, emphatically. 'There's no secrets between Mrs. Winch and me; and I shall just take it as a favour if you will read it out aloud.'

"She was so urgent on the point that I could not well refuse to comply with her request. I took the note,

carelessly enough, and opened it, never dreaming for a moment that it was anything other than what Mrs. Jakeway imagined it to be—a simple recommendation of myself as a tenant for the vacant rooms at Cliff Cottage. But it was something very different indeed, as I saw at once when I had made myself master of the spiky, irregular hand in which it was written.

“It was the note intended for Lady Spencelaugh, and had been enclosed by Mrs. Winch in the wrong envelope!

“It ran as follows: ‘DEAR LADY SPENCELAUGH,—Be on your guard against the stranger who will come up to Belair to-day to ask permission to take some photographs of the Hall. Refuse his request, and do not allow him to see Sir Philip. *He is dangerous.* He knows *something*, but how much or how little I cannot at present tell. I am unable to see you, having just been summoned to the bedside of my mother, who is dying.—Your Ladyship’s devoted M. W. Burn this when read.’

“I sat staring at the letter like a man in a dream, till Mrs. Jakeway’s shrill voice recalled me to the necessity of explaining my silence. ‘A nasty awkward hand to read, ain’t it, sir?’ said the old lady. ‘Folk now-a-days seem to try how badly they can write.’

“‘Pardon me, Mrs. Jakeway,’ I replied, very gravely, ‘but Mrs. Winch has evidently made a mistake in sending this note here. It is intended for Lady Spencelaugh, to whom the note for you has probably been sent. If you will oblige me with a light, some sealing-wax, and an envelope, I will at once enclose it to the writer, and your maid can take it down to the ‘Hand and Dagger’ some time in the course of the day.

“I think it probable that the old lady would have demurred to my summary disposition of her note, but I spoke so authoritatively, and looked so grim and determined, that she was frightened into submission, and got me the articles I wanted without a word. I addressed the envelope to Mrs. Winch, and marked it with the word *Private*, and wrote inside, ‘With Mr. John English’s compliments. Sent in mistake to Cliff Cottage.’ I then enclosed the note, and sealed it up in the presence

of Mrs. Jakeway, who looked on in wondering silence, and promised faithfully that it should be delivered at the hotel in the course of the day. 'If the mistress of the "Hand and Dagger" and I are to be enemies,' I said to myself, 'the warfare, on my side at least, shall be fair and above board.'

"Having completed all needful arrangements with regard to my apartments, I set out for Belair with a heart that beat more high and anxiously than usual. What did that woman mean by saying that I was dangerous? I, at least, was ignorant of my own power for harm. And why should I be dangerous to Lady Spencelaugh, of whose very existence I was utterly ignorant three days before? Into the heart of what strange mystery was I about to plunge? Vain questions, but pondered so deeply as I walked up to Belair, that I had no eyes for the beautiful scenery through the midst of which I was passing.

"How I sped at Belair, I must leave for another epistle. This one is so unconscionably long, that I am afraid you will never wade to the end of it. Write soon, old boy, and let me have a good account of your health. *Yule.* Ever thine, "JOHN ENGLISH."

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## CHAPTER VIII.

### JOHN ENGLISH'S SECOND LETTER.

THREE weeks after the date of his first letter, John English wrote again, as under, to his friend, Frank Mashiter:—

"MY DEAR FRANK,—My last epistle, if I remember rightly, broke off just as I was on my way to Belair. I walked up through the park in a musing mood, but paused for a moment before ringing the bell, to take in some of the architectural details of the building before me. I found it to be an ugly, incongruous pile, of various dates and styles—the east wing, which is also the oldest, being the only portion that would come out effectively as a photograph. There is, however, as I

afterwards found, a charming old picture-gallery, which will make a capital interior study.

" Bearing in mind Mrs. Winch's caution, I asked for Lady Spencelaugh, and after five minutes in an ante-room, was conducted to the apartment of her Ladyship, a most luxuriously furnished room. Lady Spencelaugh is a woman of fifty, or thereabouts, with a comfortable, matronly figure, gray hair, and a bright, healthy complexion. She is *bon style*, without question. Her manners are quiet and well-bred, almost to the point of frigidity; and have just a tinge of imperiousness, which seems to rest naturally on one who has been accustomed to receive and exact deference from all around her. Her Ladyship listened attentively to all I had to say, examined the specimen photographs I had taken with me for inspection, made a few sensible remarks about them, and then said that she did not imagine there would be any difficulty in granting my request, but that Sir Philip must be consulted in the matter before any final decision could be given. So the bell was rung, and a footman sent to inquire whether Sir Philip were at liberty to receive us. The answer was favourable. Her Ladyship rose at once, and desiring me to accompany her, and the footman to follow with my portfolio, we set out in procession for the apartments of the master of Belair.

" The library where Sir Philip is usually to be found in the morning, is in the opposite wing of the house to that occupied by Lady Spencelaugh. Indeed, the baronet and his wife, as my subsequent experience has shown me, rarely see each other till they meet at the dinner-table. We had to traverse three or four long corridors, and to cross the fine old entrance-hall, before reaching the baronet's own room, which, although known as the library, is always looked upon in the light of a private apartment by every one in the house.

A tall, thin, white-haired gentleman, of sixty-five, dressed with scrupulous neatness in a costume that was more in accordance with the fashions of a quarter of a century ago than with those of to-day; with thin, refined, aristocratic features; and with a manner that is a



happy combination of the frankness of the soldier with the high-bred courtliness of a gentleman of the old school: such was my first impression of Sir Philip Spencelaugh. Many men at his age are still robust and hearty; but Sir Philip's constitution was shattered years ago in India; and he seems to me like a man whose hold on life is now but a very feeble one. He was busily poring over some legal-looking document as we entered; and being slightly deaf, he did not hear us. He looked laboriously and painfully occupied, as though he were engaged in some duty, which, however disagreeable it might be, must yet be gone through; and was slowly spelling out the lines through his gold-rimmed double eye-glass, with such an absorbed, careworn expression on his fine clear-cut features, as would have made an excellent study for a painter in search of such an effect.

“‘Good-morning, my dear Sir Philip,’ said Lady Spencelaugh, touching her husband lightly on the shoulder. ‘That must surely be a very important document, if one may judge by the serious expression with which you regard it.’

“‘Eh! why, what, Margaret, is that you?’ exclaimed the baronet, starting up at his wife’s touch. ‘It is a rare pleasure to have a visit from you at this early hour;’ and he stooped and kissed her Ladyship’s hand gallantly.

“‘I am afraid you told me a little fib,’ said her Ladyship, smoothing out her skirts over the chair, which the attentive footman had already placed for her, ‘when you sent me word that you were not busy this morning.’

“‘Did I really send you word that I was not busy?’ said Sir Philip, with an effort to remember, as he ran his fingers through his thin white hair. ‘Pon my word, I’ve no recollection of having done so; but, in any case, I am never so busy that your Ladyship cannot have access to me.’ These words were said with a certain formality of manner, which seemed to indicate that the bond which, after all their wedded life, still served to unite Sir Philip and his wife, was based on habitude, and a due regard for the *convenances* of society, rather than on any mutual liking and esteem—a view which subsequent

observation on my part has fully confirmed. They showed, too, how weak and treacherous was the baronet's memory; and I was not long in discovering that while he has generally a very clear and vivid recollection of events that happened when he was a young man, he not unfrequently forgets the occurrences of a day or two ago; or even, as in the present instance, what has happened only five minutes before.

“‘This person,’ said Lady Spenceclough, with a slight wave of her hand in the direction of your humble servant, ‘is a Mr.—a Mr. John English,’ with a glance through her eyeglass at the card she still held between her fingers; and then she went on to explain to the baronet the object of my visit to Belair, adding that she saw no reason for refusing my request, but rather several reasons why it should be granted. ‘He has done the Duke of Sydenham’s place, and Clopford Castle,’ added her Ladyship, ‘so that I think we cannot be far wrong in according the permission he asks for. But I must leave Mr. English in your hands, my dear. You will find the contents of his portfolio rather interesting.’ And with a gracious ‘Good-morning’ to her husband, and a slight inclination of the head to me, Lady Spenceclough swept out of the room.

“‘Come up closer to the table, Mr. English,’ said the baronet, kindly, as soon as the door was closed behind her Ladyship, ‘and let us examine this portfolio of yours. Unfortunately, my eyes are no longer so strong as they used to be.’

“‘You will find this glass of service, Sir Philip,’ I said, ‘if you will only be good enough to try it.’

“‘Ah! yes, it brings out the points capitally,’ said the old gentleman. And with that he proceeded to examine the photographs, one after another, with an almost childlike eagerness, recognizing among the foreign ones many places which he had seen when a young man making the grand tour, and stopping now and then to relate to me some little anecdote of travel, the telling of which seemed to afford him much pleasure. ‘Ah! Mr. English, yours is a charming profession,’ he said, as we finished

the series. 'And although it is, to a certain extent, a mechanical one, yet there must, I am sure, be something of the genuine creative faculty in your composition, or your sun-pictures would not come out of their dark chamber so clear, exact, and beautiful, as are those which you have just shown me. To see those familiar nooks brought so vividly before me, makes me feel a lad again: and for the moment I almost forget my weary weight of years, and how near I am to the end.' He sighed wearily, and sat gazing silently for a minute or two at the fire.

"Sir Philip kept me for more than an hour longer, drawing out of me some of my experiences of travel; and seeming as much interested in, and laughing as heartily over, my adventures as though he were a *bon camarade* of my own age.

"My visit ended with an invitation to dine at the Hall on the following day—an invitation so warmly pressed on me, that I should have been ungrateful to refuse it. Sir Philip took hold of my hand as I rose to leave him. 'There is a tone, a hidden something in your voice,' he said, 'which strikes familiarly on my ear. It sounds like the voice of an old friend heard long ago—but whose voice, I cannot just now call to mind. After all,' he added, with a laugh, 'it is perhaps only an old man's fancy—To-morrow at six, remember. We keep early hours in the country.'

"'I shall look rather awkward, when I reach Belair to-morrow,' I murmured to myself as I left the room, 'if it should happen that Sir Philip has forgotten all about the invitation—a contingency by no means improbable.'

"Lady Spencelaugh was talking to one of the gardeners on the terrace as I went out. She held up a finger, and I crossed to meet her. 'Well, Mr. English,' she said, 'has Sir Philip raised any objections to your scheme?'

"'None whatever, thanks to your Ladyship,' I replied. 'Further than that, Sir Philip has done me the honour of inviting me to dine at the Hall to-morrow.'

"Her Ladyship's eyebrows went up momentarily 'Hum! Invited you to dinner, has he? To-morrow Let me see. Whom have we to-morrow?' She consulted her tablets for a moment, and then looked up with a smile: 'Yes, we shall be very glad to see you to-morrow, Mr. English,' she said; 'and pray, send up your largest portfolio of photographs: we want a little amusement these dull autumn evenings.—Good-morning;' and with another smile, and a stately inclination of the head, her Ladyship sailed back into the Hall.

"I did not dream, my Frank, when I drove up to Belair, the following afternoon, in a rickety old cab, that I was going to meet my Fate. But so it was. People talk about presentiments and omens, but, for my part, I have no faith in such nonsense. All the chief events of my life—and my career has been a strange one—have happened to me without any premonition, visible or invisible, of what was about to occur. I can guess how you would explain the matter, for I know that you are an arrant believer in all such transcendental stuff. You would say that my nerves are too coarse and strong. That my organization is not sufficiently susceptible to those delicate spiritual influences which thrill the being of a sensitive creature like yourself, and which afterwards, in cold blood (strange contradiction!) you gauge and analyse, and then work up as a psychological study, for the benefit of such as choose to read your literary lucubrations. Such fine sentimental theories seem to me like the caprices of a brain diseased. I thank the unknown progenitors who gave me these stout thews, that I don't know the meaning of the word 'dyspepsia,' and willingly leave the rest to dreamers like yourself.

"On one point, however, my organization proved sufficiently susceptible, for I had not been ten minutes in the drawing-room at Belair before I fell in love, ingloriously and helplessly. Such a splendid creature, Frank! Beautiful as a dream. But I am not going to describe her; it would seem to me like profanation to coldly catalogue her charms. I will send you her photograph instead, and then you will be able to judge faintly

what the lovely reality is like—only very faintly, for all the warmth and colour, all the rich flush of life, is wanting in these cold gray children of the camera. But no—on second thoughts, I will not favour you even thus far. I remember that coldly critical glance, that cynical curve of the lip, and I tremble. I will neither describe her to you, nor send you her portrait. Think of the most beautiful creature you have ever seen, and then of your poor friend as being hopelessly in love with her—lost beyond recovery—and you will have some idea of what my condition has been for the past three weeks, and is at this present writing.

“Her name is Frederica Spencelaugh; she is niece to Sir Philip Spencelaugh of Belair, and is the richest heiress in all Monkshire. While he who presumes to look up to her with the eyes of love is—what?—a man without a name—a wretched waif and stray of humanity, without home or kindred—‘nobody’s bairn.’ I know that I ought to cry *mea culpa*, proclaim myself a fool for my pains, and rush away from this spot at once and for ever. But, somehow, I do precisely the opposite of all this: I glory in my love, I hug it to my heart, I bind its golden chains more firmly round me every day. I know that the time must come, and that before many weeks are over, when the last page of my life’s idyl will be turned and read; when I shall awake as from a glorious dream, and have thenceforth to plod on through life with nothing but a memory to cheer me. Even so. But I will eat Love’s lotus, and dream on, while I may.

“I enjoyed my evening at Belair extremely. What a different world it seemed from that of my common work-a-day experience! The quiet refinement of the company, which placed me at my ease directly; the splendour of the rooms—for even upholstery is not without its effect, in such a case, upon a novice like myself; the dinner, with all its elegant accessories, and the way in which every want was attended to almost before it could be felt; and last, though by no means least, the easy running-fire of conversation, touching lightly upon a hundred different topics, eliciting a spark from each in

turn, and then gliding off to something else: all these things, I say, went to make up a species of mental intoxication, the delicious spell of which lingered in my brain for hours after I got back to my own dull rooms. And then, She was there! I was introduced to her in the drawing-room before dinner, and sat opposite to her at table. Later on in the evening, when the younger portion of the company was gathered round the piano, and the elders were at cards in another room, I was bewildered to find her close beside me, turning over my portfolio of photographic views. I have no recollection now of how I answered the questions she put to me respecting some of them. But I know that we glided imperceptibly into a pleasant, genial stream of talk, travel-gossip chiefly, from which I was aroused, after I know not how long a time, by seeing the malignant glare of a man fixed full on me from the opposite corner of the room. He got up when he saw that I had observed him, and turned away with an evident sneer. 'Who is that gentleman?' I asked Miss Spencelaugh, who had also seen his evil look. 'That is Mr. Duplessis,' she answered; 'a gentleman who visits frequently at Belair.' She seemed, if I may use the expression, to freeze as she said these words. The pensive softness of her face, that look which had charmed me but a moment ago, gave place to a proud defiant expression, which brought out lines of imperious beauty such as I had not imagined before. Presently she moved away, and joined the group near the piano.

"That Mr. Duplessis! A handsome man, certainly; very distinguished-looking, and evidently a general favourite. Shall I tell you the wish, Frank, that came uppermost in my mind as I saw him gliding softly about the room, with a smile and a honeyed word for every one, but always with a stealthy, feline glance out of the corners of his eyes, directed towards Miss Spencelaugh, wherever she might be? My wish was, that he and I could be planted, foot to foot, in a clearing of some western forest, with a good sword in the right hand of each of us, there to fight till one of us should fall not to rise

again. My old savage instincts are not quite dead yet, you see; they are only trampled down, and will crop up at odd times, and show their ugly faces for a moment, whatever may be the society in which I am moving. Judge, then, whether my liking for this man was augmented when I learned casually that he and Miss Spencelaugh are said to be engaged, and that the marriage is to take place in the course of a few months. I could not believe it then, and I can hardly believe it now—now, three weeks later, during which time I have had opportunities of seeing them together on several occasions. Duplessis is up at Belair nearly every day, and he and Miss Spencelaugh are necessarily thrown much into each other's society. But however much he may flatter himself on that score, I cannot bring myself to think that she loves him. Regard, friendship, liking, she may, perhaps, have for him; and admiration of his many brilliant qualities; but for him, no love-light shines in those grand black eyes—of that I am certain. I am probably deceiving myself in this matter, you will say. My chief reason for believing that she does not love him lies in the fact, that *I am not jealous of him*. If you cannot understand this without further explanation, I pity you.

“But, you will urge, among a certain class, marriages of convenience are by no means uncommon: may not this be one of them? I confess that on this score I am more uneasy than on the former; and yet, I don't know why I should be so. It seems to me an insult to Miss Spencelaugh to imagine for one moment that she would yield her hand to any man without giving her love with it. And, again, what worldly advantages are there on his side to make such a match seem probable? None; for neither in wealth, nor social position, can he pretend to equal the niece of Sir Philip Spencelaugh. No—Monsieur Henry Duplessis will never wed the heiress of Belair.

“During the three weeks that have intervened between my first visit to Belair and the date of this letter, I have completed the views required for the work on which I am engaged by my employers, and have now got in hand

a series of photographic studies of the Hall and its surroundings for Sir Philip. I have also taken the portraits of the family, including that of the lovely Frederica—a topic on which I dare not trust myself to write further.

\* \* \* \* \*

“I am writing this long letter at intervals, when I have an hour to spare, and feel i’ the mood. You know that I was always fond of pedestrian excursions. My lungs never seem to play freely unless I get through a considerable quantity of walking-exercise each day; and I have found time, since I took up my quarters at Normanford, to visit some of the most lovely nooks of this lovely county. I had been out for a long excursion one day last week, and was returning homeward by a different route, when, just beyond a tiny hamlet of about a score houses, I came upon some interesting ruins, which I at once stopped to sketch without knowing anything whatever respecting them. While I was thus occupied, an old gentleman came ambling up on his cob, whom, from his garb and general appearance, I judged to be the village doctor. In these quiet country places, strangers do not stand on ceremony. The doctor, as I shall call him, reined up his cob close behind me, and peered over my shoulder for a minute or two before speaking. ‘A tolerable sketch of the ruins, young gentleman,’ he said at last; ‘almost as good a one as I could do myself. Not quite, though—not quite.’

“There was so much self-complacency both in his words and his manner of saying them, that I was on my stilts in a moment. ‘Really, sir,’ I replied, ‘I cannot help feeling flattered to think that my poor sketch approximates, even in the slightest degree, to so superior a standard.’

“‘There, now, you are losing your temper, and talking nonsense,’ said the stranger, with a laugh. ‘Very bad things to do, both of them. I am old enough to be your father, and you have no business to get into a huff with what I said just now. You do *not* sketch as well as I do—there! and I very much question whether



you even know the name of the ruin which you are so viciously trying to draw. That arch, by the by, is quite out of the perpendicular.'

"I broke into a laugh, and tore my sketch in two, and then turned and confronted my tormentor. 'Perhaps you will be kind enough to act as my *cicerone*,' I said. You seem quite competent for the post, and I must confess that I am an entire stranger in this uncivilized part of the country.'

"'An impertinence veiled under an appearance of good-humour,' answered the doctor. 'However, I have no objection, in the present instance, to act the part of a local guide-book for your behoof. The ruin before you, young man, is that of the Abbey of Seven Saints, founded in the eleventh century.' And with that he went on to give me a long description of the old place, which, as it would in nowise interest you, I pretermit.

"'Then, the village over the hill there,' I said, when, he came to an end, 'is, I suppose, named after the old abbey?'

"'It is, and it is not,' said the stranger. 'Originally, no doubt, it was called the village of Seven Saints. But centuries ago the name got strangely corrupted, or rather, the two words got reversed, and for a longer period than I can tell you, it has been known as the village of Saint Sevens.'

"Saint Sevens! Long after I and my new acquaintance had shaken hands and parted—after I got home, and while I smoked my evening pipe, and even after I got to bed, those two words haunted my memory strangely. I was firmly impressed with the conviction that I had heard them before. But when, and where? Guided by previous experience, my mind went groping back among the dim recollections of my early life, in my first home across the sea. But all my searchings into that far-off time seemed useless! my memory was decidedly at fault; and I was still musing and pondering over the subject when I fell asleep. In the dead middle of the night, I suddenly awoke, and sat bolt upright in bed. The same moment there flashed into my brain, as

vividly as though the words had been written on the black wall in letters of flame, this quaint old local distich, which the woman of whom I have spoken to you before—she who was at once so cruel and so kind to me, when, as a child, she and her husband had me in their charge—used sometimes to croon to herself as she went about her labours in the house:

“We ring in the dark, say the bells of Saint Mark.

We ring you to heaven, say the bells of Saint Seven.

We ring you to bed, say the bells of Saint Ned.’

Next day, I verified, by personal inquiry in the neighbourhood, the fact that the old country-side rhyme which I have set down above, was not a mere figment of my own brain; but that it has a real existence, probably a very old one, and is still locally popular among the housewives and children of the labouring-men living within sound of the bells of the three churches of which it makes mention, no one of which is more than a mile apart from the others.

“Is this another step, Frank, on that dark road along which I am apparently being led without any volition of my own; and which I cannot but hope will ultimately bring me to a goal where I shall find a solution of the great mystery of my life—although, as yet, the path before me—if, indeed, there be a path at all—is hidden in densest cloud, from which neither hand nor voice comes forth to guide me on my way?

“I have thought much during the past three weeks on what passed between Mrs. Winch and myself, but, to all appearance, I am still as far as ever from grasping the key of the enigma. Had the widow’s warning letter reached Lady Spencelaugh, I might perhaps have gathered, from the conduct or conversation of the latter, some faint clue which would have guided me out of the maze of perplexity in which I am still wandering. But the landlady has not yet come back, and her Ladyship evidently knows of no reason why I should be considered by her as ‘dangerous.’ I await the return of Mrs. Winch anxiously.

“While I think of it, let me tell you a curious little

circumstance which happened to me the other day. And yet it seems almost too trivial to set down. But life is made up of trifles, and this one may have its significance as well as others.

"I had ordered a box of chemicals from London, but not receiving it in due course, I walked over to Kings-thorpe, the nearest railway station to Normanford, to inquire respecting the delay. After getting the information I needed, I turned to leave the booking-office, but halted for a moment near the door to consult the monthly time-table. The afternoon was darkening by this time, and while I was peering at the figures, a porter came and lighted a lamp close before my face. Next moment the door of some inner room was opened, and a middle-aged, plainly-dressed woman, whom I had never seen before, came out, and was brushing hastily past me, when happening to look up, her eyes met mine for a moment, and in that moment she flung up one of her arms, as though to defend herself against an invisible foe, and staggered back like one stricken by some resistless terror. I, too, fell back a pace or two in surprise. Next instant the woman rushed past me and out of the office, exclaiming as she did so: 'Come back from the dead! come back from the dead!' and disappeared in the darkness outside. I followed her out on to the platform, but she was gone already. 'Who was that woman that went out just now?' I asked the lame porter. 'Didn't see any woman, sir, therefore can't say,' he replied. I wandered up and down the platform for some time, but without seeing anything more of the woman, whom I at once set down as crazy; so you must take my narrative for what it is worth.

"On quitting Belair yesterday afternoon, I took a road through the park that I had never traversed before. It led direct from Normanford, and brought me, after a time, to the southernmost point of the park, and to the little church of Belair, where, for centuries past, the chief members of the Spencelaugh family have found their last resting-place. This church is a very humble and unpretending edifice, of the early Norman period,

repaired and renovated at various times since its erection. The little place abounds with records of the great family at the Hall. The oldest monument, and one that is much defaced, is that of a certain Sir Geoffrey Spencelaugh, a celebrated Crusader, who lies there in effigy, with crossed legs and a hound at his feet. From the time of this hero, the records of the lords of Belair and their wives follow for several centuries in regular succession. Some of them are written in mediæval Latin, and some in crabbed Old English; some of them are simple records of births and deaths; while others wander off into eulogistic strains of turgid prose, or, still worse, into limping stanzas of watery verse. I had nearly got to the end of the series, when my studies were interrupted by the entrance of a little bustling man in black, with a bunch of noisy keys, and an asthmatic cough, who introduced himself as the clerk of the church, and volunteered any information respecting the edifice and its monuments that I might require. As it happened, I did want some information just then, and there was no one more likely than he to furnish it. So, for nearly an hour, the little man and I paced the gravelled pathway of the churchyard, on which the autumn sun was shining warm and full, I listening, while he favoured me with an outline of the history of the family at Belair for the last fifty years. I now learned, for the first time, that Sir Arthur Spencelargh, the last baronet, was Miss Spencelaugh's father, and cousin to the present baronet, and that both he and his wife died in India; and that, consequently, Sir Philip is not in reality Frederica's uncle, but merely her father's cousin. I learned, further, that the present Lady Spencelaugh is Sir Philip's second wife; and that his first wife died, also in India, within a month or two of Sir Arthur's wife, the two women having been bosom-friends from girlhood. The most recent tablet in the church is one recording the death of Sir Philip's eldest-born, a son by his first wife, who died in infancy, and who was named Arthur, after the last baronet, his father's cousin.

"You wonder, probably, why I should evince so great an interest in the records of a family with whose very existence I was unacquainted only a few weeks ago. My only excuse is, that whatever has any, the remotest, reference to Her has for me a fascination which I am utterly powerless to resist. Do I hope to win her? Ah, no! I am not insane enough to hope that. But I cannot cease to love her.

"As I was returning through the park on my way home from the little church, I encountered Sir Philip himself. Tempted by the fineness of the day, he had come out for a ramble, but having wandered further than he ought to have done, was now sitting on a bench under one of the trees, doubting his ability to get back unaided to the Hall. The meeting was an opportune one. Sir Philip was glad to have the assistance of my arm back home, and I was pleased to be of even so slight a service to one whom I respect and esteem so greatly. Yes, Frank, and strange as it may seem to you, I think I may say without flattery, that a mutual and very genuine liking exists between the wealthy Sir Philip Spencelaugh, whose pedigree goes back for I know not how many centuries, and the homeless and obscure John English the photographer. He himself, on more than one occasion, has given me to understand that it is so. During the time that I was taking photographs of the Hall, he would come pottering after me; sometimes content to sit quietly near me in the sun without speaking; sometimes asking me a hundred questions respecting my profession, and the different places I have visited; according as his mood happened to be a silent or a talkative one. Then, when my morning's work was done, he would often have me into the library, and show me some of the rare old volumes it contains, for he has been somewhat of a bibliophile in his time. After that came luncheon, sometimes partaken of with him alone, sometimes in company with Miss Spencelaugh. It was pleasant to see the loving tenderness with which that fair young creature attended to the old man's wants: had they been father and daughter, the tie between them could not have been a closer one.

"I left Sir Philip at the door of the Hall, but not till he had made me promise to dine there to-day; and there to-day I have dined. Scarcely an hour has elapsed since my return home; and I am sitting up to put the last few lines to this lengthy epistle, because I am in no humour for bed.

"Frederica was there—how it thrills me to write the name!—and as beautiful as ever. I know that I ought to call her Miss Spencelaugh, and to any other than you, old friend, I should not think of calling her otherwise. There were only some three or four guests besides myself, and all of them elderly people. She and I were the only young folk present. By some blessed concatenation of circumstances, that hateful Duplessis, although expected, was unable to come; and I had her sweet society all to myself for more than an hour in the drawing-room. Such moments of felicity, Frank, can come to a fellow like me but seldom in a life-time. How will it all end? I tremble when I venture to look into the future. But I will look forward no more. I am one of Love's fatalists, to whom the sweet intoxication of the present is all in all.

"I found Sir Philip's dog-cart and a groom at my disposal when it was time to depart. A low growl of thunder sounded among the hills just as we left the Hall. 'We shall have a storm before long, sir,' said the man. 'It has been threatening all the evening, but we may, perhaps, be able to get into Normanford before the rain comes on.' After a rapid drive down the park, we halted for a minute at the lodge while the keeper came out to open the gates for us. Another vehicle, which we could just dimly make out through the darkness, drove up on the opposite side while we were waiting. Next moment the gates were opened, and we passed slowly through, while the other vehicle turned the corner of the road to enter. At the instant that we passed each other an intensely vivid flash of lightning, the first of the storm, broke from the black sky, revealing by its momentary blaze the faces of Mrs. Winch and her son Jerry. In that one brief second of time the widow's eyes and mine

met; she saw her enemy and I saw mine. Next moment, the intense blackness swallowed us up one from the other; and then the thunder spoke, and the hills answered, and to these grand accompaniments of nature I rode swiftly homeward. What will be the result of Mrs. Winch's visit to the Hall, I cannot even surmise. Lady Spencelaugh will now learn how the note written her by the widow miscarried. How this information will affect my future intimacy with the inmates of Belair, is another problem which I am quite unable to solve.

"The clock of the little church on the hill has just struck two. High time to conclude, is it not? Write soon, dear Frank, and believe me ever, your affectionate friend,

JOHN ENGLISH.

"*Postscript.*—Eleven A.M. next morning. The widow's visit to Belair has already proved fruitful in effects; witness the following note, which I have just received by special messenger:

"'Lady Spencelaugh presents her compliments to Mr. John English, and begs to inform him that in consequence of certain circumstances which it is not necessary to specify, his services will not be required at Belair to complete the series of photographic studies arranged for by Sir Philip Spencelaugh. Mr. English will oblige by sending in his bill to Lady Spencelaugh, and a cheque shall at once be sent him for the amount. Lady S. thinks it necessary to add, that the state of Sir Philip's health will entirely preclude him for some time to come from being seen by any but his most intimate friends.'

"Am I right or wrong, Frank, in thinking that there is something more in all this—in all that has happened to me since my arrival at Normanford—than can be seen on the surface? If Lady Spencelaugh and Mrs. Winch think that this step on their part will result in my quitting the little town, they are utterly mistaken. What may be the nature of the hidden link that connects me, John English, a humble wandering photographer, with the great Lady of Belair, and the landlady of an obscure

country inn, is quite beyond my power to imagine ; but here I will remain till I have sifted the mystery to the bottom. How to set about this task, I cannot tell. I see nothing clearly at present, except that by this mandate of her Ladyship I am shut out from the sweet society of her I love. This I understand and feel but too bitterly. For the rest, I must have time to think. That Miss Spencelaugh and kind-hearted Sir Philip have no hand in my dismissal, I feel firmly convinced. But as for her Ladyship, she will not get rid of me quite so easily as she imagines. "J. E."

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## CHAPTER IX.

### A MESSAGE BY WIRE.

THE 4 P.M. train, on a certain autumn afternoon, had just left Kingsthorpe Station, a little roadside place, six miles from Normanford, and Abel Garrod, the clerk in charge, was setting off home to tea, when he was summoned back into his office by the tinkling of the telegraph-bell. Having signalled the sending station that he was in attendance, he proceeded, word for word, to take down the following message : "From Marie, London, to Henri Duplessis, Lilac Lodge, near Kingsthorpe Station.—Your address is known to me. I shall reach Kingsthorpe by the afternoon train to-morrow—Wednesday. Meet me there without fail." When the message was completed Abel proceeded to copy it out in his best hand, with many flourishes of his pen, and strange contortions of his tongue, on to one of the printed forms supplied him for use on such occasions, which he then put into an envelope addressed to Mr. Duplessis. Leaving the station in charge of Tim Finch, an old stiff-jointed porter, who, with himself, made up the whole of the staff at Kingsthorpe, he crossed the line and the patch of gravelly road beyond it, and lounged slowly through his little garden and so into the house, where he found the table laid out ready for tea, and his wife busily employed cutting bread and butter.

"I'm thinking of walking as far as Lilac Lodge after



tea, missis," said Abel; "I've gotten a message by wire for Mr. Duplessis."

"A message for Mr. Duplessis!" said Jane Garrod, slowly and wonderingly, pausing with the knife in one hand and the bread in the other: "and what *is* the message, Abel, my man?"

Abel, with a little pomposity of tone, repeated it to her, word for word.

"A strange message—a very strange message!" said Jane Garrod, musingly. "So this 'Marie' comes by the four o'clock train to-morrow, does she? Well, I shall be there to see her when she arrives.—And look you here, Abel; watch Mr. Duplessis closely when he reads the message, and try to find out from his looks whether he is pleased with it or not.—And now make haste with your tea, and then set off. I would give something to be by when he receives it."

Jane Garrod was a spare and rather sharp-featured woman, about fifty years old—a woman singularly silent and undemonstrative, but observant in her own quiet way; self-contained, brooding over her own thoughts, with one of those impassive faces that give no clue to the feelings at work beneath them. Although she had never had any pretensions to good looks, she held her simple-hearted husband with a chain far stronger than any mere smiles of beauty could have woven round him. Her rule was a mild one, and Abel had the good sense to feel and acknowledge her superiority, and was, I am inclined to think, rather proud than otherwise of the bonds that held him prisoner.

As soon as Abel had finished his hasty tea, he put on his best hat and coat, and taking a stout stick in his hand, set out on his walk to Lilac Lodge. The distance by road was four good miles; but Abel knew all the short-cuts through by-lanes and fields, and round by the corner of Kirkbarrow Plantation, and so brought down the distance to three miles, and accomplished his walk easily under the hour.

It was quite dark by the time he got back home, and he found his wife sitting with unlighted candle waiting

his return, and contrary to her usual practice, not busy either sewing or knitting. She turned on him, as he entered the room, with a degree of animation foreign to her usual reticence. "Well, what news?" she asked. "How did Mr. Duplessis take the message?"

"He took it in his hand; how else?" answered the matter of fact Abel, as he prepared to put away his best coat and resume his old one.

Jane smothered the impatient exclamation that rose to her lips, and merely said: "Sit down and tell me all about it. But first you must have a glass of beer, and your slippers on; and I'll light a candle, and then the room will seem more cheerful.

Abel swelled with a sense of self-importance as he watched his wife moving about the house attending to his minor comforts; and then he sighed to think of what little consequence, either to his wife or to any one else, could be the trivial scraps of news he had to retail. When everything was comfortably arranged, Jane drew her chair up to the side of her husband, and waited in silence for him to begin.

"When I got to the top of Lorrimer's Brow," said Abel, "I could see Mr. Duplessis walking about the garden in front of the lodge, smoking a cigar; and I was right well pleased to find that he wasn't from home. Well, when I got down to the house, I just looked in over the side gate, and touched my hat to him. 'Want me, my good fellow?' says he, in his affable, smiling way—and a pleasanter way than he has with him, it would be hard to find. 'What can I do for you?' says he, holding his head a little on one side, and showing his white teeth. 'I've come over from Kingsthorpe Station, sir,' says I, 'and I've got a telegraphic dispatch for you.' 'A telegraphic dispatch for me!' says he, opening his eyes very wide indeed, so that his eyebrows went up nearly to the roots of his hair. 'Are you sure, my good man, that you've come to the right person?'—'It's for Mr. Henri Duplessis, of Lilac Lodge,' answered I; 'and I believe that's you, sir.' 'That's me, without doubt, and nobody but me,' he said; 'so let us have a look at this

mysterious document.' That's what he called it, Jane—a mysterious document. So I put my hand into my pocket, and pulled out the dispatch, and handed it to him over the gate. He stuck his cigar between his teeth and took both hands to the envelope, and tore it open, and turned the paper to the light, for it was growing darkish by this time, and read the message; and I'm sure, Jane, it was written in as plain and neat a hand as any body might wish to see, so that he could have had no difficulty in making it out.

"I never saw anybody's face change so suddenly as the face of Mr. Duplessis changed when he read that paper. You would have thought old Daddy Death had tweaked him suddenly by the ear. All the colour went out of his cheeks, and his features cramped up in a moment, just like my grandfather's when he lay a-dying. The cigar dropped from between his teeth, and he turned on me with a word which you would hardly like to hear—a very strong word, Jane—and his white lips seemed as if they wanted to say something more, but couldn't. Then he flung up his clenched hand above his head and staggered out of sight, down one of the little alleys. Well, I waited without stirring for a matter of five minutes (thinking he might mebbe want to send a reply), lounging over the gate, and sniffing the pleasant scent of the flowers. Then I saw Mr. Duplessis standing under the verandah, beckoning me to go in; so I opened the gate, and walked across the lawn, and followed him into the drawing-room. And then he told me to sit down, and asked me whether I would have a glass of sherry. And when I said I had no objection, he poured me out one, and held his case for me to pick a cigar from; and was quite jolly—so jolly and so agreeable, that I could hardly believe it was the same man I had seen only five minutes before looking so terribly white and ill. But he accounted for that naturally enough by saying, that any sudden news, good or bad, always brought on an old pain at his heart, from which he had suffered for years. Next, we got talking about the telegraph, and he asked me whether I hadn't some curious messages by it at

odd times. But I told him that Kingsthorpe was such a quiet, out-of-the-way place that it did very little business in that line, most of the messages that did come being on the railway company's business. Then he asked me, what security people had against their messages being talked over and made public by the men at the station. To which I answered, that there was rarely more than one person at a country station who understood telegraphy, and that he was always a person of good character, and pledged to secrecy as to the messages he might receive or dispatch; and that I supposed something like the same system was in use in large towns. Then he went on to say he was sure that I for one might be trusted with a thousand secrets, and not whisper a word about any of them. Then he looked at his watch, and I took that as a hint that it was time to go. So I emptied my glass, and bade him good evening, and was just leaving the room, when he slipped a couple of half-crowns into my hand; and laying his white finger lightly on my shoulder, says he: 'There's something for your trouble in coming so far. I'll be at the station to-morrow afternoon, as my sister requests.' Then with a laugh: 'See you go straight home, and don't stop at the "Green Dragon" by the way;' and so he bowed me out quite grand-like; and I walked back through the little garden with its pleasant smell of flowers, and here I am.—But, Jane, that Mr. Duplessis is a real nice gentleman, and no mistake! For my part, I can't make out why you dislike him so. It's not his fault, if he's fallen in love with Miss Frederica—no man in his senses could be long near her without falling in love with her. *I'm* in love with her. There! what do you say to that?"

"Why, that you are the same simple-hearted old goose you always were. But as for your Mr. Duplessis, so smooth and smiling, I don't know why I should dislike him, and yet——"

"And yet you do."

"And yet I do. Well, likes and dislikes come by nature, and can't be helped, any more than the colour of one's eyebrows, or the shape of one's nose."

## CHAPTER X.

## THE STRANGER AT KINGSTHORPE.

AT five minutes to four precisely, on the afternoon of the day following that of the arrival of the message by wire, Mr. Duplessis lounged up to the station, and greeting Abel Garrod graciously, inquired how soon the train might be expected to arrive.

"She has just been telegraphed," replied Abel, "and won't be more than ten minutes late to-day."

"Not more!" said Mr. Duplessis, with a smile. "As if ten minutes were not enough! I presume that railway trains are classed in the feminine gender by reason of their unpunctuality, and general remissness in keeping their appointments." And with that he sauntered down the platform, selecting a cigar from his case as he went, and evidently determined to while away the time as pleasantly as possible.

"A nice-spoken gentleman, surely," muttered Abel to himself, as he hustled off to see that his signals were all right, and the line clear, and everything in readiness for the coming train. But always with a furtive glance at the little attic window of his house, plainly to be seen from the station, out of one corner of which, where the blind was pushed a little on one side, he knew that his wife, with the assistance of a small pocket-telescope, was noting everything that happened on the platform, and patiently awaiting the arrival of the 4 P.M. train.

Mr. Duplessis, seated on the soft turf of an embankment, smoking his cigar, and whisking off the heads of the tall weeds with his cane, was apparently in no hurry for the train to arrive; and had some terrible accident befallen it, which would have delayed its coming for ever, he might, perhaps, have been none the less pleased.

At length, the lagging train rolled slowly into the station, and from it descended one passenger—a woman thickly veiled, having on a voluminous gray mantle, and a black-silk dress, much frayed and travel-stained about the skirts. Not perceiving at the first glance the person she expected there to meet her, she turned on Abel with

alarming quickness, saying in a harsh, high-pitched voice: "Monsieur Duplessis, n'est-il pas ici?" Throwing up her thick fall at the same moment, she displayed to Abel's fluttered gaze the thin, sallow face of a woman no longer either young or handsome, but who, not many years ago, had been both, lighted up by two restless, piercing black eyes, which shone out, with strange, baleful lustre, from beneath the heavy brows, black and straight, which crossed her forehead almost without a break. Before Abel had time to reply that he did not understand French, Mr. Duplessis emerged from behind an angle of the building, with a treble-distilled smile ready put on, and with one white hand ungloved and held out, ready to grasp that of the new-comer. But the woman kept her hands within the shelter of her muff, and drew back a step, and seemed to look him through with her keen black eyes. The set smile still wreathed the Canadian's lips, but the colour faded from his face, and the wrinkles, invisible to society, came out under his eyes, as he said in a voice that had lost some of its usual confidence: "Do we meet as friends or as enemies, Marie?"

"As enemies," replied the woman—"as enemies till death!"

"So be it; but listen to me first," he said, with an effort to regain his usual easy, confident manner. And then he began to address her earnestly in French; and Abel moved away out of earshot, fearful of exciting suspicion.

The conversation between the two lasted for about a quarter of an hour, and Jane Garrod, looking from the little attic window, with her eye fixed to the end of the telescope, watched their every movement with a patience that never wearied. At first, the woman seemed to listen to Mr. Duplessis with a sort of careless disdain, as though nothing he might say could influence her resolves in the slightest degree; he striving, meanwhile, to urge some important point on her consideration. But by and by, she began to show some signs of interest in his words, almost, as it were, in spite of herself—an interest

which seemed to deepen as he went on. And when with outspread hands he came to a sudden stop, as though appealing to her to confirm what he had just said, she replied with three or four words only, and then held out her hand for him to clasp, as though that were the seal of the compact between them. He took her proffered hand, and made as though he would have kissed it; but she drew it back quickly with a shudder, and thrust it into her muff. His eyebrows went up to a point for one moment, and then he turned and beckoned to Abel Garrod, who was loitering at the other end of the platform.

"This lady is my sister," said Mr. Duplessis, gravely to Abel—"a sister whom I have not seen for many years. She is about to stay for a few days in this neighbourhood, and I want to know where I can obtain two decent quiet rooms for her while she is here, as she cannot bear the noise and bustle of a hotel. Two rooms—a sitting-room and a bedroom—are what she requires."

Abel puzzled his brains for a minute or two, but could not call to mind anything at all likely to suit the lady.

"Look here, now," said Mr. Duplessis, suddenly taking him by the button: "have you no spare rooms in your own house?"

"We have a spare bedroom," said Abel, diffidently.

"And a spare sitting-room, too—eh?"

"A parlour, which we seldom use, except on Sundays. But my wife——"

"Exactly the thing—could not be better," interrupted Mr. Duplessis. "Leave me to settle everything with your wife. Just shoulder that bag, will you?—Allons, ma Marie." And he strode off towards the house with Madame his sister leaning on his arm; Abel, with the black leather-bag, bringing up the rear.

In a few voluble words, Mr. Duplessis explained his wishes to the quiet, serious-looking woman who opened the door in answer to his knock. Jane replied that she certainly had two spare rooms, and that she should be happy to let the lady have them for a few days, but that they were only furnished in a very humble style, and perhaps the lady might not like them. But all little

difficulties were smoothed over by the indefatigable Canadian; and Madame was at once installed in the rooms, and Jane instructed to prepare tea for her without delay.

Mr. Duplessis would fain have taken his leave at this juncture till the morrow, but Madame would not hear of such a thing. It was cruel of him, she averred, to quit so soon the sister whom he had not seen for six long years. He must take tea with her, and pass the evening with her, otherwise how would the long *triste* hours charm themselves away? Mr. Duplessis submitted with tolerable grace, and drank tea with his sister. After that, they had a long conversation together in French; and then they made Abel hunt up an old pack of cards, and played *écarté* till the clock struck nine, when Mr. Duplessis jumped up, and declared absolutely that he must go.

When Mr. Duplessis was gone, and his sister safely abed, and Abel snoozing in his easy-chair, Jane Garrod, with her apron thrown over her head, sat brooding beside the dying fire, going carefully over in her own mind all that had been said and done since the arrival of her mysterious lodger.

Jane had a tolerable conversational knowledge of French, having, when young, lived as lady's maid in Paris for a couple of years. But she was particularly careful that neither Mr. Duplessis nor his sister should suspect her of such an acquirement; and when, once or twice, while she was waiting on them at the tea-table, they preferred some request to her in that language, forgetting for the moment her supposed ignorance of it, she had merely stared stolidly from one to the other, till they repeated their request in English. They thus considered, and naturally so, that they were perfectly safe in talking over their secret concerns in her presence.

"If I could only have heard what they said to one another on the platform, when they first met," said Jane Garrod to herself, "I should have something to go upon. But as it is, I have only bits and scraps of their talk after they got here to judge by, for they had evidently settled their plans before coming to the house. These



bits and scraps are just what I must try to remember, and piece together. 'You thought it would be impossible for me to discover your retreat,' said Madame, 'so cunningly had you arranged everything; and that you would never see my face in this world again.'

"To which Monsieur replied: 'Let the past go, Marie; it is not a subject one would choose for contemplation. There is a pleasant future before us, if we only choose to avail ourselves of it.'

"'In that little *ij* lies the whole question,' responded Madame. 'Should you ever feel inclined to play me false, remember that one breath of mine would scatter your castle to the winds.'

"'No fear of that,' answered the brother; 'so long as we act fairly by one another, the compact will benefit both of us.'

"After that, they went on with their cards for a little while, till Madame suddenly flung hers across the floor. 'Ah, *séducteur!* monster!' she exclaimed, grinding out the words from between her teeth. 'What a fool I must be to play cards with you, or do anything but tear your black heart out of your bosom! When I think of the horrible fate to which you had doomed me, I know not how I refrain from killing you!'

"'Why do you thus excite yourself?' asked Monsieur, very quietly. 'I have told you already that I was misled by Van Goost. He gave me to understand that——'

"'Liar!' screamed Madame. 'I know of old what value to set on what you say.'

"'I will show you Van Goost's letters to-morrow, and prove to you how greatly you misjudge me,' said Monsieur.

"Her only answer was a scornful laugh. And with that, Monsieur went quite humble-like and picked up her cards, and dealt them afresh, and then they went on playing as if nothing had happened. A strange couple, truly!"

In one corner of the little simply-furnished room, hung a crayon-portrait of a child—a child of rare beauty, with long black ringlets, and black eyes, and with a skipping-

rope thrown carelessly over her arm. Jane Garrod, taking the candle in her hand, went up to this portrait, and gazed earnestly on it. "They tell me, darling," she said, "that you have promised your hand to this bad man. But you do not love him, dear, I am sure of that. You are unhappy, and just now you hardly care what happens to you; and they got you to promise to become his wife, and so make yourself miserable till the day you die. He is a bad man, darling; and you shall not marry him, if Jane Garrod can anyhow help it; no, never—never!"

"Never what, missis—never what?" said Abel, who awoke just in time to hear the last word or two, and was now rubbing his eyes sleepily.

"Never go to sleep in your arm chair after supper," said his wife—"it's a downright lazy habit."

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## CHAPTER XI.

### MARIE'S DEPARTURE.

MR. DUPLESSIS drove up to Kingsthorpe Station in the dog-cart of his friend and admirer, Mr. Frank Challis, at nine the following morning—in fact, before Madame had arisen, as Jane Garrod told him when she went down in answer to his summons. It was no matter, he said; he would go on as far as Lea Wood, where he had a little business to transact, and be back in the course of a couple of hours at the latest. In the meantime, Mrs. Garrod would perhaps oblige him by taking that package of prepared chocolate, which he had brought specially for his sister, knowing her tastes of old, and by mixing a little of it for Madame's breakfast. And greeting Jane with a nod and a smile, he flicked a fly off the mare's left ear with his whip, and drove rapidly away.

"Chocolate! How came you by this?" demanded Madame, when Jane took her a cup of the beverage to bed.

"It was brought this morning by Mr. Duplessis specially for you," answered Jane.

Madame, with a shudder, put down the cup she was

raising to her lips. "Ah, Henri, *mon frère*, we are not quite so simple as we seem!" she exclaimed. Then, leaping suddenly out of bed, she flung open the case-ment, and with something like an imprecation, muttered under her breath, she dashed the cup and its contents into the garden below. "Take my advice," she said, turning to Jane, "and put that package behind the fire; and bring me up a cup of coffee, together with a *petit verre*—that is, a small glass of brandy—just to compose my nerves."

In the fresh light of morning, Madame looked even more sallow and haggard than on the preceding evening. But when her toilet was completed, and she sat down to breakfast in the little parlour, there was a youthful bloom on her cheeks, such as many a maiden of seventeen might have envied—had it only been natural.

"What excellent coffee you make!—quite in the French style," said Madame. "You have never been in France, have you?" she asked, turning suddenly on Jane with her suspicious black eyes.

"I was in service, when I was young, where there was a French cook, and he taught me how to make coffee," answered Jane, skilfully evading a dangerous question.

Madame was satisfied, and toyed indolently with her toast. "My brother promised to be back in two hours I think you said?" she remarked to Jane after awhile. "Poor Henri! how surprised he would be to receive my message!" she went on, with a little sneering laugh. "He had not seen me for so long a time, that I believe he had got the idea into his foolish head that he would never see me again. Let me think.—How many months has he been in this neighbourhood? Ah, yes, about eighteen, to be sure. He hinted something to me last night about having fallen in love with some Miss—Miss ——— What was the name?"

"Miss Spencelaugh, perhaps," suggested Jane, who was quite willing, for a purpose of her own, to hear all that her lodger might have to say on this subject.

"Yes, that was the name—Miss Frederica Spence-

laugh of Belair," said Madame. "The young lady is both rich and beautiful—is it not so?"

"Both," answered Jane.

"And does she favour the suit of Mr. Duplessis?"

"That is more than I can take on me to say," replied Jane. "Folk do say that the old baronet takes very kindly to the notion, and that he is very fond of Mr. Duplessis, who is up at Belair most days."

"But Mr. Duplessis, although he has enough to live on in a quiet way, is not rich. How, then, is it that so wealthy a man as this Sir Philip Spencelaugh looks with such favourable eyes on his suit?"

"Why, you see, Madame, Mr. Duplessis was fortunate enough to save the baronet's life at some place abroad, and from that time the old gentleman seemed to take a fancy to him; and then, as he says, his niece is rich enough to wed a pauper from the workhouse, if she thinks proper to do so. But, besides all that, Sir Philip is getting old and infirm, and would no doubt like to see Miss Frederica comfortably settled before anything serious happens to himself."

"But this Miss Spencelaugh has already had several suitors, has she not?"

"Yes; several."

"And rejected them all?"

"So I have been told."

"Which would seem to imply that there is some one more favoured than the others, whom she cannot have, and that she will not, in consequence, have any one else. Is it not so?"

"On that point, I can say nothing. It is a matter best known to Miss Spencelaugh herself."

"If he has won the consent of the uncle," said Madame, "that of the niece will follow in due course, or else she must be very different from most other young ladies I have known, and Monsieur Henri Duplessis must have lost some of those powers of fascination which, years ago, he knew so well how to exercise."

A dark shadow seemed to settle down over Madame's face as she finished speaking, and her thick black eye-

brows came together without a break. For a minute or two she seemed lost in deep thought; then with a stamp of her foot she rose from the chair, and began to pace the floor of the little room, muttering disjointed sentences to herself in French, the import of which Jane caught only by fitful flashes.

"Yes, he was very fascinating, ten—fifteen years ago, this charming Monsieur Henri. He had always a grand passion for black eyes, and hair to match; to-day, it seems, his tastes remain unchanged. But behind all, always the gold—always! You are a dangerous man, Monsieur Henri. One—two fortunes are not sufficient for you: you now crave a third. But is that my affair to-day? Ah, no, no, no! The chain is broken, and each for the future makes his own road."

Jane Garrod, in her conversation with the sister of Mr. Duplessis, had not allowed that lady to suppose that her knowledge of Belair and its inmates was derived from anything more trustworthy than vague hearsay, whereas it was, in fact, of a much more special and intimate character. Jane had lived for many years as maid with Frederica's mother, to whom she was much attached; and after that lady's death, she stayed with the motherless girl till the latter was committed to the care of her first governess. Even after she had a husband and a home of her own, Jane's humble love for the heiress of Belair lost nothing of its warmth from absence. She watched the child grow in beauty from year to year, and still persisted in looking on herself as one of that family of which she had for so many years formed a part. Her interest in the sayings and doings of the inmates of Belair was kept up by weekly visits from her niece Kitty, who was still-room maid at the Hall, and whose Sunday evenings were invariably spent with her Aunt Garrod, in pleasant gossiping respecting everything that had come under Kitty's sharp eyes in the course of the week. Thus it was that Jane Garrod knew all about the frequent visits of Mr. Duplessis to Belair; and almost from the first mention of his name, she learned to hate the man—no milder word would convey the inten-

sity of her dislike—with one of those blind, unreasoning, instinctive hatreds, which seem even more inexplicable than love at first sight, especially when, as in the present instance, no personal feelings are engaged in the case. She had seen Mr Duplessis some half-dozen times at church, and once or twice when he had called at the station respecting the trains; but not all his winning smiles and handsome looks could soften ever so little the feeling with which she regarded him. “False, false, false!” she muttered to herself every time she saw him. “For all you look such a fine gentleman, you are a true son of the Father of Lies!” To Kitty she would sometimes say, as she was seeing the girl home through field and coppice on balmy Sunday evenings: “Why can’t Miss Frederica make up her mind to wed Lord Blencowan, and be such a nice gentleman, that worships the very ground she walks on? But there’s something more in my darling’s heart than you and I know of, Kitty. There’s somebody that she loves in secret—somebody that she can’t have, and so she won’t try to like anybody else. See how she’s changed from the happy, light-hearted girl she used to be! I’m getting old, Kitty, but I’m not quite blind yet; they are blind who can’t see that the darling is eating her heart away.”

Mr. Duplessis coming back from Lea Wood about eleven o’clock, found his sister in quite an affable mood, and stayed and partook of lunch with her. He came again in the evening, and stopped till a late hour playing *carté*, and drinking cognac; and intimated on leaving, that he should call for her the next day but one, and take her away on a visit to some friends.

Madame passed a great portion of the second day in bed, reading a French novel, and was rather inclined to be captious and fault-finding. Ultimately she was brought into a better frame of mind by the nice little dinner served up by Jane, to procure the materials for which, Abel had been turned out of bed at 4 A.M., and started off by the early carrier to Eastringham. Twice she asked Jane whether it were really true that Miss Spence-laugh was such a great heiress as people represented,

and on being assured that such was the fact, expressed much satisfaction.

True to his promise, Mr. Duplessis drove up to the station on the afternoon of the third day. Madame had been expecting him for half an hour past, and was therefore quite ready to start. Having settled Jane's very reasonable little bill, and having, over and above it, pressed on her acceptance a liberal *douceur*, which she as steadily refused to take, Mr. Duplessis assisted his sister into the gig which he had brought to fetch her, and resumed the reins. He was just on the point of starting, when Madame arrested him for a moment by laying her hand on his arm. "Let me get down, Henri Duplessis," she said to him in French, loud enough for Jane to overhear her. "I am afraid of you. I will not go with you to-day. Let me descend, I say!"

The only answer was a mocking laugh, and a sharp, angry lash with the whip, which made the horse bound madly forward, and drowned all further words. Jane Garrod, standing on the step outside the door, saw a white frightened face turned to her for a moment, and then the gig and its occupants were lost round the turn of the road. "He did not say to what place he was taking her," muttered Jane to herself as she turned into the house; "he only said that he was taking her to some friends. Pray Heaven that no harm befall her! It seems to me that I've seen that gig before to-day. It surely belongs to Luke Grayling, landlord of the 'Silver Lion' at Fairwood."

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## CHAPTER XII.

MRS. WINCH IS SOLICITED TO NAME THE DAY.

"I MUST say, Martha, that black becomes you amazingly."

The speaker was Mr. Brackenridge; the hour 11 P.M.; and the place, the snuggerly behind the bar of the "Hand and Dagger." The last of the parlour company was gone; the house was closed for the night; the servants were in bed; and the two who sat there were at liberty

to do their courting unwatched by idle eyes. The chemist, portly but slightly bloated, lolled back in an easy-chair, a steaming glass of grog at his elbow, and a freshly lighted cheroot between his lips. While the widow, more pale and serious-looking than ever in her mourning-dress, sat gazing steadily into the fire, with her feet resting on the fender, and her chin dropped into the hollow of one nervous, masculine-looking hand.

"I should like you much better, Gurney, if you were not such a flatterer," she said, but in a tone by no means indicative of displeasure.

"I ain't a flatterer, upon my soul, Martha—at least, not in the present case," responded Brackenridge. "You do look nice, and I shouldn't care who heard me say so. You look more of a lady in a black dress than in anything else."

The widow shook her head dissentingly, but her pale cheek flushed slightly. She loved, as much as it lay in her cold nature to love any one, this burly, loud-voiced chemist, who, if he were coarse and dissipated, had at least his share of good looks; and was, besides, considerably younger than herself; and his words fell pleasantly on her ears.

"Now that we are by ourselves, and everything jolly," resumed the chemist after a few silent pulls at his cigar, "I may as well tell you, Martha, what is uppermost in my mind, and has been for a long time, only this unfortunate business of your mother's death has made me put off speaking to you about it till now. Without further preface, here it is: Martha, oblige me by naming the day."

The widow's cheek flushed more deeply than before; then she sighed; then she picked up a cinder with the tongs, and deposited it carefully on the fire; and then she spoke.

"Lady Spencelaugh——" said Mrs. Winch.

"Oh, hang Lady Spencelaugh! a fig for her Ladyship!" interrupted Brackenridge, with an angry snap of the fingers, before the widow could say another word. "I hope you are not going to fling that old woman in my



teeth again. I've had enough of her, I can tell you. Here have I been courting you these eighteen months past; you have agreed to take me for better or worse; but whenever I speak a word about marriage, Lady Spencelaugh is straightway pitched at me, and I am expected to sit down quietly, and never say a word in return. But I can't do it, Martha; and what's more, I won't. What is Lady Spencelaugh to me, I should like to know, or I to Lady Spencelaugh, that she should be allowed to stand between the happiness of two people who are fond of one another? And why this woman should be so set against me, is past my finding out. She has never seen me above half-a-dozen times, and then only for a minute or two in the shop. And why a sensible woman like you should allow yourself to be so guided by her, is a still bigger puzzle."

A wintry smile flickered round the widow's thin lips. "If you had not interrupted me so rudely," she said, "I was about to observe that Lady Spencelaugh's prejudice against you, whether reasonable or unreasonable, is still a fact, but one which is not quite insurmountable."

"Go on," said Mr. Brackenridge, as he took a hearty pull at the contents of his glass. "It's all a mystification to me; I'm blessed if it ain't."

"To you, Lady Spencelaugh's opposition may seem a matter of little importance," resumed the widow; "to me, it is a very awkward fact; and I may as well tell you at once, that to marry in direct opposition to her wishes would be a course that would be very painful to me. There is, however, one method by which you might at the same time win Lady Spencelaugh's cordial support to our union, earn a handsome wedding-present for yourself, and be at liberty to name whatever day might suit you best for a certain ceremony."

Whatever playfulness might seem to lurk behind the widow's words was certainly belied by the anxious and careworn expression that sat on her pale features.

"More riddles," said Mr. Brackenridge, sententiously. "In the name of common-sense, what is it you are driving at, Martha Winch?"

"Listen, and you shall learn."

She drew her chair closer to his, and laid her hand on his arm, to add weight to what she was about to say. "You know Mr. John English, the photographer, who stayed here two nights, and who is now lodging next door to you?"

The chemist nodded.

"Lady Spencelaugh is anxious that he should quit Normanford at once and for ever; I am also anxious that he should do so. Now, do not ask what reasons her Ladyship and I have for wishing this, because I tell you frankly that you will never know them."

"What! not when you and I are married?" burst in Brackenridge.

"Not when you and I are married—if that event ever take place," answered the widow, calmly. "There are some things which I cannot tell even to you, and this is one of them."

"Hang me! if I haven't always thought there was some secret between you and that old madam up at Belair."

"Then your usual penetration has not been at fault," responded Mrs. Winch. "There *is* a secret between us, and be assured that a secret it will remain. Once for all, I wish you to understand this."

"Some rubbish, I dare say, not worth the knowing," said Brackenridge contemptuously. "But about this other business—what is it you want me to do?"

"I want you to set those dull wits of yours to work, and try whether you cannot devise some scheme by which this man could be induced to leave Normanford."

"Well, supposing that were done," said the chemist, "what could her Ladyship afford to stand in return?"

"Oh, her Ladyship is not a person to tie herself down to any terms—in fact, she would not appear at all in the matter; but any one who acted the part of a discreet friend would have no cause to think himself illiberally treated. Everything, however, would depend upon the style in which the business was conducted."

"Very pleasant, but very vague," said the chemist.

"For my part, I like something definite. Would that be considered as too much to give in case it was done well?" and he held up two fingers as he spoke.

The widow pursed her lips, but did not speak.

"Perhaps the case would stand that?" said Brackenridge, elevating three fingers.

The ghost of a smile fitted across the widow's sallow face.

"Would it stand another?" said the chemist, with four fingers in the air.

The widow's eyebrows lowered ominously. "Leave everything to her Ladyship," she whispered.

"A very fine idea that!" said Brackenridge. "But, however, we won't shave it too fine just at present, especially as all the work has yet to be done. And now I come to look at the matter more closely, I'm blessed if I see how this fellow is to be got rid of, if he's determined to stay. It looks blue."

"If the matter had been an easy and straightforward one, your assistance would not have been required," said Mrs. Winch, coldly. "On one point let me warn you: there must be no violence, no scandal, no exposure—that is imperative."

"Should you call it violence if he were found dead some morning, and it were never discovered how he had met his fate?"

The eyes of the widow and the chemist met across the little table. "You have no business to ask such a question, Gurney Brackenridge," said Mrs. Winch, sternly. "Neither Lady Spencelaugh nor I wish any harm to the young man—we only wish him away, never to come back. You are too headstrong and impulsive; it was foolish of me to mention this business to you at all. You have not discretion enough to carry it through with safety."

"I know one thing about this affair, Martha Winch," said Brackenridge, "and that is, that if this young fellow were found lying stiff and stark to-morrow, both you and Lady Spencelaugh would be anything but sorry—your good wishes go as far as that. As to being discreet

or not, that will be shown best by the event. Remember, not a farthing less than three hundred.—There goes the quarter to twelve: it's high time to be off." He threw away the end of his cigar, finished his grog, and got up with a yawn and a stretch of his huge muscular arms. The widow rose also. Brackenridge slid an arm round her waist, and stooped and kissed her cheek. "Ah, Martha," he said, "you do not really love me, or else you would not refuse to tell me this secret."

"I do love you, Gurney, as I never loved man before," said the widow: "and if the secret were mine alone, I would tell it you this minute. But it concerns the interests of Lady Spenceclough, and I have sworn never to reveal it to living soul; and I will keep my word."

"Well, well, you know best, I suppose," replied the chemist, soothingly. "We won't quarrel about it, anyhow.—And as to this other business, I'll think it over, and give you my opinion to-morrow night."

"Above all things, Gurney, remember there must be no violence, no scandal, no exposure."

"And a wedding as soon after as I like, eh, old girl?"

"That is a matter which I must leave entirely to you," said the widow, as bashfully as though she had numbered but seventeen summers. Then might have been heard the sound of a discreet double kiss; and after a whispered good-night, Mr. Brackenridge found himself standing in the solitary moon-lit street, and heard the door of the "Hand and Dagger" bolted behind him. The expression of his face changed in a moment; he shook his clenched hand at the door he had just quitted.

"You think to come the old soldier over me, do you, you ugly cat?" he muttered, with an evil scowl. "You intend to keep this secret from your own Gurney, do you? But I'll wring it out of you when we're married, or else I'll wring your neck. That old Madam up at the Hall has more money than she knows what to do with, and would stand squeezing beautifully—I always felt that I was born to be a gentleman."

## CHAPTER XIII.

## ANOTHER LINK IN THE CHAIN.

THREE weeks had passed since the return of Mrs. Winch to Normanford, and John English's polite dismissal from Belair. The young photographer had kept his word, as far as his stay at Normanford was concerned, going about his business here and there in the daytime, but always making his way back to Cliff Cottage at night-fall. The chain, one end of which he had succeeded in grasping, had broken in his hands, and he knew no more than a blind man where to find the missing links. Being of a straightforward, unsuspecting nature, and not prone to think evil of others, the idea of any cunningly-devised scheme of deception, with himself for the victim, and reputable, well-to-do people for its authors, was one that made its way but slowly into his mind. There were times when he was disposed to consider all his suspicions as so many wild chimeras of his own fancy, without any foundation in fact; and it is not improbable that in some such mood he would have quitted Normanford for ever, had there not been another attraction pulling powerfully at his heart-strings, which made him loth to leave the little country town, and so quench positively, and for ever, his last faint hopes of again seeing her whom he so dearly loved. For, to see her again, and by chance as it were, some day when she was walking or riding out; to see her at a distance, and without her knowledge; was the utmost that he could now hope for. He was banished from Belair; her sweet society was lost to him for ever; his very existence was probably forgotten by this time; but day passed after day, and still John English lingered purposelessly in the little town. From this state of indecision and restless moody communing with his own heart, he was roused after a time by the receipt of a letter from his friend, Frank Mashiter—a hearty wholesome letter, which acted as a mental tonic, endowing his faded purpose with fresh vitality, and counselling him, in a cheerful friendly spirit, to subordinate his day-dreams to the clear practical duty before him—the duty of doing

his utmost to trace the hidden links of the chain which evidently connected him in some mysterious way with the landlady of the "Hand and Dagger."

"Frank's letter is like a shower-bath—bracing, but severe," said John to himself, as he finished reading his friend's epistle. "Here have I been dreaming away one day after another, like the veriest lotus-eater; forgetting everything but that sweet delusion which is at once the pain and the gladness of my life. But nothing in this world is ever won by dreaming, and I'll build castles in the air no more."

"I think I see my way to the next step in this matter," resumed John, after some cogitation. "I want certain information, and if any man can give it me, my friend Mr. Edwin can. I'll stroll down to his place this very evening."

Mr. Edwin was, literally and truly, the oldest inhabitant of Normanford, being over ninety years of age. He had been master of the Foundation School for half a century, but had retired, years ago, on a small annuity, and now lived with his sister, a maiden lady of seventy, in a little cottage on the outskirts of the town. How John English came to know the ex-schoolmaster, was in this wise. He was one morning visited at his lodgings by a little old-fashioned lady with very white hair, and very black eyes, who introduced herself as Miss Edwin, and then went on to say that she had come to ask whether Mr. English would do her the favour of taking a photographic likeness of her brother, who was the oldest inhabitant of Normanford, and confined to his house by an infirmity of the feet. Her brother had one son, who had emigrated to Australia many years ago. Father and son would never meet again in this world, and the portrait was wanted as a souvenir to send to that new home across the sea. She, Miss Edwin, was quite aware that portrait-taking was out of Mr. English's ordinary line of business; but under the circumstances, he would, perhaps——; and the little white-haired old lady put her two hands together, and looked up so entreatingly in his face, that John had no heart to refuse her request. John

called on Mr. Edwin the same afternoon, and found him to be a little withered gentleman, very sprightly and cheerful, despite his great age and the ailment which confined him to the house. The portrait was duly taken, as well as one of Miss Edwin, and the two duly despatched to the antipodes; but John's visits to the little cottage did not cease with this. He had grown to like the society of the old gentleman and his sister, a liking which was cordially reciprocated; and he not unfrequently strolled down to the cottage after his day's work was over, for the sake of a pleasant chat with the Nestor of the little town.

Mr. Edwin, with his sister by way of supplement or addendum, might be considered as a living chronicle of the sayings and doings of Normanford for the last half-century; and John English could not have found any one more likely to supply him with the information he needed. With the propitiatory offering of a packet of genuine Kendal Brown in his pocket—for Mr. Edwin was a great snuff-taker—the young photographer went down to the cottage on the evening of the day on which he received the letter from his friend at Nice. It was not difficult to bring the conversation round to the required point, for the ex-schoolmaster was always ready and willing to talk about any person or thing that referred in any way to his beloved town.

"Yes," said Mr. Edwin, in reply to a question of John's, as he balanced a pinch of his favourite mixture between finger and thumb—"the landlady of the 'Hand and Dagger' has certainly been a resident of Normanford for many years.—For how many years? Let me consider. Why, for two-and-twenty years, this past summer. She came to Belair with Lady Spencelaugh—with the present Lady Spencelaugh, that is—who is Sir Philip's second wife, his first lady having died in India, poor creature! a few years after marriage. Martha Winch was a young unmarried woman at that time, and a great favourite with her Ladyship. After a time she married Job Winch, a pudding-headed fellow, who originally was hostler at the very hotel of which he

afterwards became landlord. I remember it was currently reported at the time that it was her Ladyship's money which put the newly-married couple into the 'Hand and Dagger;' and through all these years, Mrs. Winch has never quite broken off her connection with Belair. She still goes frequently to see Lady Spencelaugh."

"How do you account," said John, "for the existence of so strong a tie between two people so different in social position as Lady Spencelaugh and Mrs. Winch?"

"All I can tell you with regard to that is from hearsay, and not from observation," replied the schoolmaster. "Lady Spencelaugh is the daughter of a poor Yorkshire squire. When young, her health was very delicate; and her father, with the view of improving it, sent her to be brought up in the house of a small farmer, one of his tenants, who resided somewhere in that wild stretch of country between Ingleton and Hawes, in the North-West Riding. Mrs. Winch that is now, was the daughter of this farmer; and the two girls living under the same roof for five or six years, became firmly attached to one another; and not all the chances and changes of after-life have been able to trample out this early liking. The great lady up at Belair has never forgotten the friend of her youth."

"Had not Mrs. Winch a brother, when she first came to Normanford?" asked John.

"To be sure she had," replied the old gentleman; "and a drunken, dissolute, gambling dog he was—a surgeon by profession. He came to Normanford, and began to practise here soon after the arrival of Lady Spencelaugh. But he was too fond of shaking his elbow to do any good either to himself or others; and after leading a useless, bankrupt sort of life for two or three years, he left the country, and has not been heard of in this neighbourhood since."

"Do you remember his name?" said John.

"To be sure. His name was Jeremiah, or Jerry, as he was more commonly called.

"But the surname?" urged John.



"There I confess I'm at fault," said Mr. Edwin, after a minute or two of silent cogitation. "It was rather an uncommon name, I'm sure; but——"

"Kreefe," broke in Miss Edwin, hastily, and then went on silently with her knitting.

"Ah, to be sure," said her brother. "The fellow's name was Jeremiah Kreefe."

"Was he married?" said John.

"Yes. He brought his wife with him when he came here, and took her away when he went."

"Any family?"

"No—none," said Miss Edwin, sharply, considering, perhaps, that it came within her province to answer such a question.

"Stay a moment, Janet, my dear," said Mr. Edwin, with lifted fore-finger. "Have you forgotten what I told you when I came back from Liverpool?"

"No, I have not forgotten," answered Miss Edwin; "but I still hold to the same opinion that I did then, that it was not the child of Dr. Kreefe and his wife whom you saw."

"The child might have been put out to nurse, you know, without any one in this neighbourhood being aware of it," said her brother.

"A most unlikely thing," replied Miss Edwin. "If the child were their own, what necessity existed for any concealment of the fact? Besides, I remember to have heard Mrs. Kreefe say more than once, that she thought husband would love her more, and be a better man, if there was only a pretty baby-face to entice him home of an evening. No, you may rely upon it, Gustavus, the child whom you saw was not their own."

"Then you incline to the belief," said Mr. Edwin, "that it was the child of some relative or friend whom they were taking over with them for reasons best known to themselves."

"I cannot think otherwise," answered the little lady.

This dialogue was listened to by John English with breathless interest. "I have a particular reason," he

said, "for wishing to know all that can now be learned respecting the antecedents of this man. Pray oblige me by giving me whatever particulars you can recollect of the little incident just spoken of by you."

"Willingly," replied Mr Edwin; "but there is really nothing worth telling. However—to begin at the beginning—Kreefe and his wife had been about two years at Normanford, when it was given out that they were going to emigrate; and sure enough, a few weeks later, the house was shut up, and we were told that they were gone. The fact of their going did not make much impression on my mind, the acquaintanceship being of the most distant kind; besides which I was busy just then fitting out my boy Jack, whose mind was firmly bent on going to Australia. About a week or nine days after the departure of the Kreefes from Normanford, I found myself at Liverpool with Jack in tow. Well, sir, I saw my boy safely on board ship, took my last grip of his hand, saw the vessel he was in fairly under weigh, and was walking slowly along among the docks and basins, for I lost my way going back, but felt just then in too disconsolate a mood to care whither I was wandering, when I saw a cab draw up a few paces before me, from which, much to my surprise, there descended Mr. and Mrs. Kreefe, and a child, a boy, apparently about five years of age. They did not see me, and in the humour in which I then was, I did not care to go forward and make myself known. I waited a few minutes, and saw their luggage hoisted on board, and themselves cross the gangway, and disappear below decks, and then I came away. Janet and I have talked the matter over many times since that day, but I don't recollect that we have ever spoken of it to any one but you; you see, it was no business of ours."

John had listened to this narration with the deepest interest. Mr. Edwin spoke again. "I remember," he said, "that Kreefe's death was reported here several years ago, and that Mrs. Winch went into mourning avowedly on his account."

"Was there not something peculiar," said John—

“something out of the common way, in the appearance of this Dr. Kreefe ? ”

“He walked with a limp, one of his legs being shorter than the other,” said the ex-schoolmaster.

“And had a slight cast in one eye,” added Miss Edwin.

“And a very peculiar, rugose, aquiline nose,” continued her brother. “Take him altogether, Jeremiah Kreefe was certainly a singular looking being ; and would not readily be forgotten.”

John English walked back to Cliff Cottage that night with many strange new thoughts at work in his mind.

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## CHAPTER XIV

### THE POSTSCRIPT.

THE landlady of the “Hand and Dagger,” sitting one afternoon in a thoughtful mood, in the bow-window of her little snuggerly, which looked across the market-place, saw John English turn the corner of the opposite street, and make as though he were coming to the hotel. The widow’s heart beat faster than usual as she drew back, into the darkest corner of the room, but still with her eye fixed on the young photographer. He had been in her thoughts at the very moment of coming into view—of late, indeed, he had been there to the exclusion of almost every other topic. His prolonged stay in Normanford made her anxious and uneasy. Nearly a month had elapsed since his dismissal from Belair, but still he lingered ; and, as Mrs. Winch had heard from a reliable source, no hint had yet been received by Mrs. Jakeway as to the probability of his early departure. Why did he not go ? And why did he call so often on that gossiping old Mr. Edwin and his sister—people who had known her (Mrs. Winch) ever since her arrival at Normanford ? Above all, what and how much of a certain matter was known to him ? That was the great question, and it was one that troubled Mrs. Winch’s peace of mind by day and night. And now he was actually com-

ing to visit her! The widow drew in her breath, and her thin lips compressed themselves tightly, while her eyebrows fell a little lower over the cold wary eyes beneath them. She became intent on her sewing. Suddenly the door opened, and John English stood before her.

"Why, Mr. English, what a stranger you are!" said the landlady, dropping her work, and rising with much cordiality of manner. "I thought you had entirely forgotten the old roof that first sheltered you when you came to Normanford." She stopped to smile on him, and then she added: "Will you not take a chair? Pray be seated."

John English was rather taken aback by this reception, so different from what he had expected; and forgot for a moment or two what he had intended to say. Could it be really true that he had been labouring all this time under some terrible misapprehension—that there was nothing but a mare's nest at the bottom of the business, and that the widow was secretly laughing at him? No; the proofs were too overwhelming; and the woman who stood before him had merely put on that smiling mask to help her in her endeavours to hide the truth.

"We will never mind the old roof just now, if you please, Mrs. Winch," said John, gravely, as he closed the door, and advanced into the room. "I have no doubt you are quite as well aware as I am of the nature of the business which has brought me here to-day—better, perhaps."

"No, really," answered the widow, with a little dissentient smile and shake of the head. "You credit me with far more knowledge, Mr. English, than I can lay claim to. Positively, since you put the case on a business footing, I have not the remotest idea as to what has induced you to favour me with a visit this afternoon." She paused for a moment to thread her needle with steady hand and clear eye. "Stay, though," she added, as John was about to speak; "now that I come to think of it, I can perhaps guess the cause of your visit. It is about that ridiculous business of the crossed notes? Annoy-

ing to you, I have no doubt; especially after reading by accident my opinion of you as expressed in the note intended for Lady Spencelaugh. How you must have looked when you read it! and the only wonder is, you have not been here about it before. I declare I have had several good laughs to myself when I have thought about it. But I am forgetting that it has not yet been explained to you. No wonder you look mystified. You see, it all arose through a mistake of mine. Your name is not such a very uncommon one; and I mistook you for another Mr. English—a Mr. Ephraim English, a man whom I have never seen; but who, unfortunately, has it in his power seriously to annoy both Lady Spencelaugh and me. As soon as I discovered the mistake, I sent Jerry to your lodgings with a message, asking you to be good enough to look in here the first time you might be passing; but I suppose the poor foolish lad omitted to deliver it. Under the circumstances, I hope you will accept my apologies for the annoyance which the mistake has caused you. I can assure you that you do not regret it more heartily than I do myself.”

“But you were quite aware from the first, Mrs. Winch,” said the young man, “that my name was *John* English, and nothing else. I am really at a loss to understand how such a mistake could arise.”

“So was I, when I came to think coolly of it afterwards,” said the widow. “So stupid of me, was it not? But besides the singular coincidence of the surname, there were other circumstances on which I need not enter now, which induced me to think that you were the person I had in my mind when that note was written. But now that the matter has been clearly explained, I hope there is nothing to prevent our being good friends for the future.”

John was silent. Was this woman’s explanation to be accepted as the truth? To his ear, it had not the fine ring of sterling coin.

“We will put aside for the present your explanation of the note, Mrs. Winch, which may or may not be correct,” said John, in his simple straightforward way,

which had yet nothing of rudeness in it. "There are one or two other circumstances which I wish to lay before you, and which you may, perhaps, be able to explain equally well."

The widow had been steadily sewing all this time; she now paused to bite off the end of her thread, and then looked up at John with a smile. She did not speak, but her eyes said, "Go on," as plainly as words could have done.

"You had a brother," began John; and then he stopped, for the widow started at his words, and turned on him a quick, terrified glance, which he did not fail to note. But next moment, she was herself again, as cool and collected as before. "You had a brother," resumed John; "by name Jeremiah Kreefe; by profession a surgeon; who, with his wife, emigrated to America twenty-one years ago."

"Quite true," said the widow; "and who, you might have added, unfortunately died there some seven or eight years since. Proceed, sir, pray."

"Mr. Kreefe walked with a limp, and had a peculiar cast in one of his eyes."

"Admitted," said the widow. "His misfortune, and not his fault, in both cases."

"Mr. Kreefe never had a son, I think?"

"Certainly not, as far as I am aware."

"He was in the habit, I believe, of corresponding with you occasionally after his arrival in America."

"Yes; Jerry and I were always friendly; and I have had many letters from him at different times. But really, Mr. English, these are purely family matters, and I do not see in what way they can possibly concern you."

"I shall come to that presently," said John. "As you were on such intimate terms with your brother, you can doubtless give me some particulars respecting the name, birthplace, and parentage of the child—a boy—whom he took with him from England, and who lived with him in America for four years. Can you not do this?"

The widow felt her heart cease beating for a moment

or two; she seemed to grow pale internally; but her voice, when she spoke, expressed nothing but genuine surprise.

"You astonish me, Mr. English," she said, "more than I can tell. I think you must have been misinformed; but if what you say is true, I assure you that I know nothing whatever of any child taken by my brother and his wife with them to America. Surely, you *must* have been misinformed."

"There is nothing but the simple truth in what I have told you," said John, sadly. "I whom you see before you, am that unfortunate child. I was taken across the Atlantic in the care of your brother; I lived with him for four years in some little country town; and then——"

"Yes, and then?" said the widow, eagerly.

"What followed after that does not concern my story at present," said John.—"Do you mean, Mrs. Winch," he went on, "to tell me solemnly that you know nothing whatever of such a circumstance?"

"I assert most positively, Mr. English," said the landlady, "that I am in utter and entire ignorance of the transaction you mention. My brother in this matter never favoured me with his confidence; and certainly his letters never hinted, even in the most remote manner, at anything of the kind. You have surprised me more than I could express to you in any words."

"When I came here this afternoon," said John, "it was with the conviction that, if you only chose to do so, you could give me some particulars of my birth and parentage—that you could, perhaps, even tell me my father's name, and reveal to me who I am. But I suppose I must go back as ignorant as I came."

The widow had triumphed, and she could afford to sympathise. "I declare, Mr. English, it is quite a little romance," she said. "Hardly to be credited in these sober nineteenth-century days, is it? Sad for you, of course, and I feel for you sincerely. But the world holds many a good man who has been obliged to do without a father; and I am sure, Mr. English, that you have talent enough to make your own career."

John sat gazing moodily into the fire, but answered never a word.

"My brother, in his letters from Willsburgh——"

"Willsburgh!" exclaimed John, starting up; "that is the very name! That is the place where I lived with Jeremiah Kreefe. Do what I would, I never could bring it to mind before.—Thank you, Mrs. Winch, for so valuable a piece of information;" and he took out his pocket-book, and wrote down the name there and then. The widow, in her elation, had incautiously lost a point, and she was proportionally mortified thereby.

"And what do you purpose doing next in this matter, Mr. English?" she asked.—"It may be useful to know his next move," she said to herself.

"As soon as my affairs will admit of it," said John, "I shall go to America, and hunt out this Willsburgh. And if I only succeed in finding it (and find it I will), I may be able to pick up some information there which will materially assist me in my search."

"Your search for what?"

"My search for a Name," said John.

"You appear to forget, Mr. English, that my brother and his wife are both dead."

"Is Mrs. Kreefe dead, then?" said John, in a tone of disappointment. "My hopes lay in finding her still alive."

"She died shortly after her husband—seven years ago," said the widow, telling the lie boldly. Barbara Kreefe had been dead only a few months. "Besides which, they removed from Willsburgh sixteen or seventeen years since, and have doubtless been forgotten long ago."

"Then my hopes in that direction are crushed into a very small compass," said John.—"I need not detain you any longer, Mrs. Winch," he said as he rose. "I suspected you wrongly, and I am sorry for it."

"Pray do not speak of it, Mr. English," said the widow, graciously. "If I can assist you in any way in this matter, I'm sure I shall be happy to do so."

John English took up his hat.

"Is your stay in Normanford likely to be a long one?"



said the widow, carelessly, as she proceeded to fold up the work on which she had been so busily engaged.

"I can hardly tell," said John, with hesitation; "I have little to stay for now, and you may expect any day to hear that I am gone."

"You will not go without saying good-bye, I hope?" said the smiling landlady.

Scarcely had John said good-bye for the time being, and left the room, than the widow rose, and with flashing eyes, and her hands crossed over her bosom, as though to keep her excitement within bounds, began to pace the little apartment with rapid strides. "The danger is over, thank Heaven!" she exclaimed, fervently; "but on the edge of what a precipice have we been standing—my Lady and I! How strange that he, out of all the millions now living in the world, should turn up at this out-of-the-way spot, without either instinct or memory to guide his footsteps hither! Who can say with surety that the evil they have done, be it ever so long ago, shall never be brought to light? What a straightforward, frank, handsome fellow he is! Ah, if he only knew all! But I dare not imagine such a possibility. No, we are safe now, my Lady and I—safe—safe—safe?"

Hardly had the last words escaped her lips, when the door was re-opened, and John English stood again before her. Some fine instinct warned her of coming danger, even before he had spoken a word, and she was on her guard in a moment. "I think, Mrs. Winch," said John—and there was a change in his tone which she did not fail to detect—"I think you stated most positively that the fact of your brother having taken a child with him to America was entirely unknown to you?"

"Precisely so. I had no knowledge of the circumstance whatever."

"What port did your brother sail from?"

"From Liverpool, I believe."

"Did you not go to Liverpool with your brother to see him off?" demanded John.

"By what right do you catechise me in this way, Mr.

English?" said the widow, haughtily. All her efforts could not keep the tale-tale colour out of her cheeks.

"By the right of a man who has been foully wronged," replied John. "Answer me a straightforward question in a straightforward way, Mrs. Winch. Did you, or did you not, accompany your brother to Liverpool, and see him safe on board ship?"

"I did," said the widow.

"Then most certainly you must be aware that your brother took a child with him in the vessel."

"I am aware of nothing of the kind. I am positive that there was no child there."

"Let me refresh your memory, and remember, I have my information from an eye-witness who is still alive. You and your brother, together with his wife and a boy about five years old, were driven in a cab to the dock in which the vessel they were to sail in was moored. You bade them good-bye there and then. Dr. Kreefe, his wife, and the lad then went aboard; and after a last wave of the hand, you turned away, and were driven back in the same cab by which you had come.—Who was that boy?"

"I will answer no more questions," said the widow, huskily. She was pale enough now.

"Then you refuse to answer the question I have just asked you?"

"I do."

"Consider well before you finally decide. You have been prevaricating with me from the first, and that you took a prominent part in the black piece of work which tore a helpless child from his home, and deprived him of his name, I can no longer doubt. But much of this evil may still be undone by a free and frank confession. I warn you, however, that should you still refuse to furnish me with the information I want, I will use my utmost efforts—ay, though it should cost me twenty of the best years of my life, and every penny I possess—to bring this crime to light, and punish the perpetrators of it. Once more I ask you, whose child was it that was taken aboard?"

"The child of a friend," said the landlady, slowly and coldly, "which my brother agreed to take out to some of its relatives in America. It died during the voyage; and that is all I know of the matter."

"Woman, you lie!" said John, savagely. "I see plainly that you will not speak the truth. I have given you fair warning; and when the day of retribution comes, I will not spare you."

"And I warn you, John English, not to meddle further in a matter that in nowise concerns you," said the widow. "You know not whither it may lead you. As for your threats, I laugh at them. A young man's empty bravado!—nothing more. He is gone, and does not hear me. Oh, my lady, my lady! what evil day is this coming surely upon us!"

John English, on leaving his lodgings to walk up to the hotel, had had a note from old Mr. Edwin put into his hands. It was a simple invitation to go and smoke a friendly pipe with the old gentleman that evening, if John were not otherwise engaged, but concluded with a postscript, couched in the following words: "I forgot to mention, when I was telling you the other evening about that affair of Krecfe's, in which you seemed so strangely interested, that Mrs. Winch, of the 'Hand and Dagger,' was at the docks that day, at the same time that I was, and saw the doctor, his wife, and the strange child on board the ship." The postscript then went on to give the further details as recounted by John to Mrs. Winch.

John, on receiving the note, had opened it; and having taken in the contents with one careless glance, without noticing the postscript, had then thrust it into his pocket, his mind being anxiously engaged just then with his approaching visit to Mrs. Winch. On leaving the "Hand and Dagger" he had referred to Mr. Edwin's note again, in order to ascertain whether any particular hour had been named by the old gentleman for his visit. What effect the perusal of the postscript had on him, the reader has already seen.

On leaving the "Hand and Dagger" for the second time, John English set off in the direction of Belair. He

had made up his mind during the last few minutes to call upon Lady Spencelaugh, and seek from her some explanation as to the contents of Mrs. Winch's note, which seemed to connect him in some mysterious way with her Ladyship; for he no longer gave any credence to the landlady's version of the affair. "Mrs. Winch may perhaps be playing a hidden game on her own account, and without Lady Spencelaugh's knowledge; my seeing her Ladyship may therefore be of service both to herself and me. If, on the contrary, her Ladyship is leagued with Mrs. Winch against me, I shall at least know the forces against which I have to fight." The reading of the postscript had decided him not to leave Normanford for the present.

When he reached Belair, he sent in his card, with a remark pencilled on it, that his business was urgent and private. "Her Ladyship is not at home," said the large footman, returning after an interval of three minutes with John's card still on his salver. And so John was politely bowed out of the great house.

"I will write to Lady Spencelaugh to-night," said John to himself, as he sauntered back through the park; "She shall have my statement of the facts, as well as Mrs. Winch's; and she must then judge for herself between the two."

He wrote accordingly; but his letter was returned to him the following morning in a sealed envelope, without a word of any kind. "We are to be enemies, then, I suppose," said John, sadly, as he flung his missive into the fire, and watched it shrivel into ashes.

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## CHAPTER XV.

### MR. BRACKENRIDGE'S NOCTURNAL ADVENTURE.

CLIFF COTTAGE, as the reader is already aware, formed one of two small semi-detached houses standing on the outskirts of Normanford. The remaining house was dignified with the title of Beech Lodge, and was the residence of Mr. Brackenridge, the chemist. Mr. Brackenridge's little establishment was supervised by his

sister Hannah, a light-complexioned, demure-faced young woman, with quiet, sly manners, thoroughly devoted to her brother. Hannah's little scraps of local gossip, which she used to retail to Brackenridge over his meals, were generally regarded by that worthy as so much empty jabber, and treated with a contempt which he was at no pains to conceal. But of late, Hannah had found a subject for gossip in the sayings and doings of their new neighbour, Mr. John English, as retailed her daily, with sundry amplifications and exaggerations, by Mrs. Jakeway, and as noted by her own sharp eyes and ears, which never seemed to fail in interesting her brother. It was a subject, too, on which Hannah herself was never weary of dilating; for to reveal a little secret, she had fallen in love, in her quiet, self-possessed way, with the handsome young photographer, and every little circumstance connected with him had a special interest in her eyes.

Gurney Brackenridge was sitting over his tea one evening a few days after John English's interview with Mrs. Winch, as related in the last chapter; and Hannah was sitting opposite to him, replenishing his cup as often as it was empty, and keeping him supplied with fresh slices of toast. The chemist detested both his shop and his profession, as, indeed, he did anything that necessitated labour, either of head or hands; and he generally contrived to reach home between seven and eight o'clock, leaving later customers to the tender mercies of his assistant. He had lately been prescribing for Mrs. Jakeway, whose health was somewhat out of repair.

"She may as well go on with the mixture as before," said Mr. Brackenridge, in reply to a remark by his sister, that the old lady was worse rather than better to-day.

"I was in to see her about an hour ago," said Hannah "and found her quite nervous at the idea of having to pass the night all alone in the house."

"All alone! How's that?" said the chemist, looking up with sudden interest.

"Oh, she contrived to quarrel with her servant this

morning, and sent her about her business at a moment's notice."

"That's Mother Jake all over," remarked the chemist. "Always quarrelling with her servants, and always getting fresh ones.—But where's Mr. E.?"

"Oh, he went out on business this morning by train, and left word that he should not be home till some time to-morrow."

"Not home till to-morrow?" said the chemist, quickly. Then, after a thoughtful pause, during which he sat gazing intently into the fire, he said: "You will be going in to see Mother Jake again, I suppose, before the evening is over?"

"Yes," said Hannah; "I promised to go in at half past nine, and give the old lady her medicine, and see the premises all safe for the night."

"And quite right, too," said her brother. "But, before you go in, Hannah, I will give you a pill, which you must strictly enjoin her to take the last thing before getting into bed. And, Hannah, while you are there, just contrive to leave unfastened the shutters and window of the back sitting-room. Do you understand?"

The eyes of brother and sister met in a long, steady gaze. "I understand," said Hannah, slowly. "It shall be done."

It never entered into the mind of Hannah Brackenridge to question any order of her brother. Implicit obedience to the slightest wish was the rule of her life. Had Gurney said to her, "Hannah, oblige me by giving Mother Jake a quarter of an ounce of prussic acid," I think it probable that she would have complied with his request without demur.

Gurney, meanwhile, sat brooding at home in company with his pipe. Mrs. Winch's refusal to reveal to him the nature of the hidden bond that united her and Lady Spencelaugh in a common grudge against the young photographer, still preyed, an undigested wrong, upon his mind. "Curse you both!" he muttered, shaking his fist at a china shepherd and shepherdess, fixed in a permanent loving embrace on the chimney-piece. "I'll

find out the secret for myself, without any help from you, Martha, my dear; and then won't I make her pay through the nose to keep me quiet! Mother Jake says her lodger is always writing—that he keeps a journal—more fool he!—so there ought to be something among his papers, if I could only get at 'em, which would give me the clue to what I want to know. At all events, I'll try. Nothing risk, nothing have. I shall be a gentleman yet—I know I shall."

Presently, he heard his sister letting herself in at the front-door. "Well, have you made all square?" he said as she entered the room.

"I have done as you wished me to do," replied Hannah.

"Has the old woman taken her pill?"

"Yes; I stayed with her while she took it."

"Get me out the brandy bottle, and then you can go to bed as soon as you like."

"Yes, Gurney," said the obedient Hannah. And after having set out the favourite black bottle, together with hot water and sugar, she kissed her brother on the forehead; and next minute he heard her going softly upstairs to bed.

The chemist sat smoking and drinking till the clock struck eleven. "Old Mother Jake ought to be as sound as a top by this time, or else there's no virtue in my pill," he muttered to himself; and putting down his pipe he rose, and went quietly into the next room, taking the candle with him. Having unlocked a drawer, he took out a pair of list slippers; a dark lantern; a bunch of skeleton keys; a small life-preserver; a black overcoat; and a sort of skull-cap, made of the skin of some animal with the hair outside, and having long flaps to come low down over the ears, and tie under the chin. After inducting himself into the overcoat, slippers and cap—and so disguised, Hannah herself would hardly have known him at the first glance—he put the lantern, the keys, and the life-preserver into his pocket, blew out the candle, and let himself noiselessly out by a door which opened into the garden at the back of the house. The

gardens of Beech Lodge and Cliff Cottage ran parallel one to the other, with only a low wall between them, than which the outer walls, shutting them in at sides and back, were considerably higher. The houses stood by themselves, with fields on three sides of them, which sloped gently up from the backs of the two gardens to where a thick plantation of young trees crowned the prospect.

The night was cold, calm, and overcast; and Hannah, sitting at her bedroom window, shrouded in a thick shawl, could barely distinguish the black ominous shadow gliding stealthily over the sward below. At length it stopped for a moment, as if to reconnoitre, she still watching it with straining eyes. Then, satisfied apparently that it was unseen, it leaped quickly over the dividing-wall, and half crouching, half running, passed swiftly out of sight, doubling back towards the rear of Cliff Cottage. Hannah had taken the precaution to open her window an inch or two at the bottom; and after listening intently for a short time, she heard a slight creaking noise, which she knew to be produced by the opening of Mrs. Jakeway's window; followed by another and a fainter creak, as the intruder closed it behind him. Then Hannah knew that, so far, her brother had safely accomplished his purpose, whatever that purpose might be.

The heart of Gurney Brackenridge failed him a little when he found himself standing alone in the dark in the little room which he had entered in so felonious a manner. But a hearty pull at a spirit-flask, which he had not failed to bring with him, revived in some measure his fainting courage; and after the further stimulus of a double-distilled oath, muttered discreetly in his throat, he set about his perquisition with something of his old confidence. As a friend of Mrs. Jakeway, he was well acquainted with the interior of Cliff Cottage, and knew the position of the furniture; so that a very slender ray of light from his lantern sufficed to guide him safely to the door of the room in which he then was. This room was on the ground-floor, and at the back of the house; but the object of which he was in search would be found,



if anywhere, in the first-floor front, that being Mr. John English's sitting-room. So up the stairs, in his list slippers, Mr. Brackenridge stole lightly, scarcely venturing to breathe till he found himself safe on the landing at the top. Three doors opened on to this landing—namely, that of Mrs. Jakeway's bedroom, that of John English's bedroom, and that of the latter's sitting-room. Mr. Brackenridge, applying his ear to the keyhole of Mrs. Jakeway's door, could hear the old lady breathing stertorously as she lay asleep; and a grim smile stole over his face as he listened. Softly he turned the handle, and softly he opened the door—a little way, just far enough to enable him to insert his arm, and draw the key from the inside. In another minute, Mrs. Jakeway was safely locked up in her own room.

Mr. Brackenridge's next proceeding was to enter John English's bedroom; but a brief glance round it, with the full light of his lantern turned on, was sufficient to satisfy his curiosity. Next into the sitting-room, where his first act was to draw the thick morcen curtains carefully across the windows, so that no ray of light could penetrate to the outside. Having closed the door, and feeling perfectly secure from intrusion, he lighted one of the two mould-candles on the table, and then refreshed himself with another drain from his flask. His scheme, so far, had succeeded admirably; but the most difficult part of it was yet to come. John English's brass-bound mahogany writing-desk lay on the table before him, but fast locked; and if none of the skeleton keys he had brought with him were capable of opening it, he would still be as far as ever from the object of his search. One after the other he tried them carefully and knowingly, in a style which seemed to indicate that it was not the first time he had fingered them; and one after the other they failed to touch the tongue of the lock, and were put aside as useless. The chemist's brow grew damp; his hands began to tremble; there was only one key left untried. He paused with it in his fingers for a moment, and glanced nervously around. The candle had guttered down for want of snuffing, and burned with a dull, un-

steady flame. His own shadow sprawling up the wall and half across the ceiling, struck him as hideous and unfamiliar. "Serve me right for coming on such a fool's errand!" he muttered to himself. "I wish I was well out of it."

He inserted the last key in the lock as he spoke. It gave a little click, and his heart echoed the sound. He forgot his nervousness in a moment; and after opening the room-door, and listening intently for a couple of minutes, he went back lightly to the table, drew the candle nearer, and opened the desk. The first articles that engaged Brackenridge's attention were a number of letters, some of recent and some of old date. A cursory glance satisfied him that the majority of them were merely business letters; but there were a few from John's sick friend at Nice which gave promise of more interest, and the chemist deliberately set to work to read them through. He found several passages in them in which the names of Mrs. Winch and those of the different members of the family at Belair were mentioned; but for want of a clue to what John himself had written, most of the allusions were past his comprehension. There was only one passage that he thought it worth his while to copy, and even that referred to things which, as yet, were so many mysteries to him, but which he hoped would not be so for long. The passage in question ran as follows: "What you tell me with regard to your recognition of the portrait of Mrs. Winch's brother, and the note intended for Lady Spencelaugh, which came so singularly under your notice, certainly seems to point to some hidden link of connection between yourself and these two women. The matter is undoubtedly worth further investigation, but I would not advise you to build too lofty a superstructure of hopes on so weak a foundation. From your description of Mrs. Winch, I should imagine her to be a very dangerous sort of woman. Make yourself acquainted, if possible, with her antecedents and past history. If it is to her interest to hide certain facts from you, it is equally to your interest to have those facts brought to light. I agree with you that, as it

stands at present, the case is not one to call for legal assistance, but there is no knowing how soon it may be."

Brackenridge turned to the desk with heightened curiosity; and there, at the very bottom, under a further litter of business documents, he found a thin morocco-bound volume, labelled "Diary," on which he pounced with avidity. A very brief inspection of it was sufficient to enable him to find the date of John English's arrival at Normanford: and commencing at that point, he read forward carefully and steadily to the end. It was disappointing to find that end only brought him to a period some three weeks anterior to the date of his reading, after which time not a line had been written. Then, again, the Diary was by no means so fully written as he had expected to find it. To the chemist's thinking, it did not enter sufficiently into detail; its narration of interesting facts was by far too bald and commonplace. The only philosophy, however, was to make the best of it as it was; and with several growls of dissatisfaction, Brackenridge turned over one page after another, till he had gone completely through it. He read the account of John's recognition of the portrait; he read a copy of the note intended for Lady Spence-laugh, as closely as John could recollect the words (and that puzzled him more than anything); he read the account of John's reception at Belair; and, finally, he read how a certain local rhyme, relating to the bells of St. Seven, had floated strangely into John's memory in the middle of the night. The interviews with Mr. Edwin and Mrs. Winch were after-events not set down in the Diary.

Brackenridge had gained something by his nefarious scheme, but certainly not so much as he had hoped for. He had gathered the vague outline of some dark conspiracy, in the meshes of which John English was blindly struggling; but beyond that he had learned nothing. Baffled and enraged, he sat for some minutes brooding silently with the Diary before him. Suddenly, he heard the faint click of the garden wicket, and the

crunching of gravel, as some one came up the little pathway towards the front door. He started at the sound, like the guilty scoundrel he was. In another moment he had put back the Diary and letters, and had closed the desk; but he had no recollection of the process afterwards. Then he blew out the candles, and stepping lightly, made for the door, hoping to get back undetected by the way he had come. But he was too late already. The intruder, who, indeed, could be none other than John English come back by the last train, had admitted himself by means of a latch-key, and was now rubbing his feet on the mat. Big, brawny fellow though Gurney Brackenridge was, he shunned the risk of an encounter in the dark with the sinewy young photographer, and showed his wisdom thereby. With the instinct of despair, he turned back into the room, and winding his way noiselessly between the chairs and tables, he made for one of the windows, and drawing the thick curtains on one side, he slipped behind them, and breathed once more.

Scarcely was this accomplished, when John English entered the room. Mrs. Jakeway, not expecting him home till morning, had omitted to place a candle and matches on the bracket in the hall, and he was consequently still in the dark; but, after a few failures, he contrived to get a light from his fusees.

"Phew! how close and fusty the room smells!" he exclaimed aloud. "A little fresh air would be an improvement;" and stalking to the window where Brackenridge was not, he drew aside the curtain, and threw up the sash, and let the cool night air into the little room. "One last pipe, and then to bed," said John, still aloud. And presently a waft of Cavendish penetrated to where the chemist lay perdue, revolving black schemes of revenge against the man who had been the unconscious means of placing him in so dangerous a predicament. How slowly the lagging minutes seemed to wear themselves away till John English, having finished his pipe, shut down the window, and after a last glance round, took the light with him, and went to

bed! Brackenridge now breathed more freely, and allowed his cramped limbs a slight change of posture. But he knew that there was still a long dreary watch to be undergone before he might venture to leave his hiding-place, and try to steal away on the chance of John being soundly asleep. He heard one quarter after another chimed by the clock of the little church on the hill; but not till five of them had come and gone, did he venture to emerge from his hiding-place. His lantern had burnt itself out by this time, and he durst not venture to strike a match. He made his way across the room in the direction of the door, as a child goes up stairs, a step at a time, slowly. He had passed the table, and had coasted safely round the easy-chair, which, with its great sprawling legs, formed a dangerous obstacle in the dark, and was groping with outstretched hands for the expected door, when he suddenly stumbled over John's travelling-case, which lay directly in his path. In trying to save himself, he unconsciously clutched a frail mahogany whatnot, on which reposed several of Mrs. Jakeway's most cherished ornaments, and so came headlong to the floor with a terrible crash. With an instinct that would have done credit to a practised burglar, he lay perfectly still. Through the thin dividing-wall, he heard the creak of the bedstead, as John sprang suddenly up; and then a doubting "Who's there?" as though no answer were expected. None was given. After a moment or two of intense silence, he heard John growl out something about "those confounded cats," and then turned over, to catch up the broken end of his sleep.

Brackenridge lay for fully half an hour among the fragments of Mrs. Jakeway's china, without stirring a limb. At the end of that time, he gathered himself up slowly and cautiously, without making as much noise as would have frightened a mouse. Then the door was noiselessly opened, and he found himself on the mat outside, and everything quiet so far. There was the landing to cross next, and then the stairs to descend, after which he would feel himself in comparative safety.

But there was a loose plank in the flooring near the top of the stairs, and of course (as he afterwards said) it was like his "cursed luck" that he should happen to put his foot on it, which he did. John English slept as lightly as a Red Indian, and the familiar sound of the loose plank awoke him in an instant—awoke him to the consciousness that there must be some one in the house who had no business there, and with him, in such a case, action followed instantly on thought. Brackenridge heard John's leap out of bed, and turning on the instant, he sprang at the bedroom door, and turned the key in the lock, having noticed previously that it was on the outside. Then down the stairs, and through the lower room, and out of the French window into the garden, at a headlong pace.

Strong man though John English was, the stout old door resisted all his efforts to open it, a fact which he was not long in discovering. So he turned at once to the window, which looked out at the back of the house, and flung up the lower sash—turned in time to see a dark figure speeding along the garden, evidently making for the wall, and so over that into the fields beyond. John was never without fire-arms—he had a hunter's love for them—and in a case on his dressing-table was a brace of pistols, from one of which the charge had not been drawn, and the little drawer in his looking-glass was full of caps. It was the work of a moment to find his pistol in the dark, and put a fresh cap on the nipple. The clouds had cleared away, and the stars were shining brightly; and just as the man had succeeded in mounting the wall, John took steady aim, and fired. The man gave a loud cry, and flinging up his arms, dropped to the ground like a piece of lead on the outer side of the wall.

"My God! perhaps I have killed him," exclaimed John to himself with a shudder, for he had fired in the heat of his passion, without a thought for after-consequences; and he began to hurry on a few articles of dress, preparatory to going down to look after the burglar. But scarcely had two minutes elapsed, when his

quick eyes caught sight of a figure hurrying up the sloping ground behind the garden, and evidently making for the shelter of the plantation at the top of the hill. John paused in his dressing, and watched the figure till it was lost to view among the young trees.

"I'm glad I didn't kill him," murmured John to himself. "Let the beggar go. He's not worth troubling about further; but I think he has got something that will make him remember his visit to Cliff Cottage."

An hour later, the watchful Hannah, who had never been to bed, admitted her brother quietly at the front door; and, like a sensible young woman, dressed his wound, and sympathized with him, without asking him any impertinent questions as to how he had come by his mishap.

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## CHAPTER XVI.

### KATAFANGO THE MAGICIAN.

MR. BRACKENRIDGE'S wound, without being a dangerous one, was sufficiently severe to confine him to the house for several days. It was given out in Normanford that he had fallen and sprained his left shoulder, and as he had sufficient knowledge of surgery to enable him to dispense with the services of a doctor in the case, the secret of his night's adventure was confined to himself and his sister. Hannah tended him faithfully, and asked no questions; being, indeed, well aware, from previous experience, that her brother always "cut up rough," as he himself termed it, when cross-examined against his will. Mr. Brackenridge's temper, which was not angelic at the best of times, was by no means improved by confinement to his own room. But his fits of captious irritability were interspersed with long hours of silent, gloomy brooding, during which—so Hannah's feminine instinct told her—he was busy hatching some black scheme of revenge against his neighbour next door, a scheme which that taciturn and quietly-watchful young person determined to do her utmost to frustrate. She loved the handsome young pho-

tographer, this thin, pale-faced girl, who was so shy and retiring, and yet who never blushed; loved him with a love which could not exactly be called hopeless, because no element of hope had ever entered into the composition of it. Hannah Brackenridge had too much cold good sense to dream, even in her wildest moments, that John English would ever seek to woo and win such a one as herself. She loved him prepositionally—with an *if*. If she had been very handsome, and very rich, and very accomplished, she would have striven to lure this wild hawk to her side, and put her jesses round him, and hold him as her own for ever. But being none of these things, being only a poor, pale-faced girl, with scarcely a word to say for herself in the presence of strangers, she was fain to cherish her little dream of love as a flower on which no sun would ever shine. Mrs. Jakeway and she were very friendly, and a day seldom passed without the chemist's sister paying one or more visits to Cliff Cottage. Thus it was that she made the acquaintance of John, who had always a smile and a pleasant word for the shy, quiet girl, who was so different in every way from her blustering loud-voiced brother.

Mr. Brackenridge was quite as glad to get about again, and look after the interests of his business, as his sister was to be relieved from further attendance on him as an invalid. There was no inhabitant of Normanford who talked, and surmised, and wondered more about the attempted burglary at Cliff Cottage, than the gossip-loving chemist. He had a long talk respecting it with the head constable of the little town on the very day of his recovery; and examined with much interest the bunch of skeleton-keys which had been picked up in Mr. English's room, and which, it was hoped, would ultimately lead to the discovery of the offender. The affair had been a source of considerable excitement in so small a place; and when Mr. Brackenridge declared in open conclave in the smoke-room of the "Hand and Dagger," that he had heard a pistol-shot on the night in question, but had been too lazy to get out of bed and



inquire into the cause of it, he became quite an authority in the matter, and was taken by the button on the following morning, and treated to two "sherries," and three "bitters," by certain friends who had not been so fortunate as to hear his narrative of the previous evening. It was a fortunate thing, everybody declared, that Mr. English was not in the habit of keeping money or other valuables in his writing-desk; and that beyond having his desk broken open, and his letters and papers tossed about, no harm had been done. The head constable gave it as his opinion, to a small circle of private friends, that the whole affair bore the mark of a practised London hand, and that before the winter was over they would probably hear of other attempts, no great distance away. A shudder ran through Normanford at these tidings, and the inhabitants became all at once very particular in looking after the fastenings of their doors and windows, those people being, as a rule, the most careful in that respect who had the least to lose. Mrs. Jakeway had a famous time of it, you may be sure. She had no less than eighteen invitations to tea at different houses in the course of the four weeks following the attack; and a little china shepherdess, which had been broken by the fall of the whatnot, was looked upon with much interest wherever she went. But days and weeks passed away without affording any clue to the perpetrator of the offence, and the topic was gradually worn threadbare by much discussion, and fell silently into the background, yielding place to the more immediate interests of the day.

As before stated, Normanford was six miles from any railway; but a rude two-horse omnibus, built for travelling over heavy country roads, ran twice a day to Duke's Hill Station, eight miles away, to meet the morning and evening mail trains. John English having certain business to transact at the other end of the county, started one bright frosty morning by the nine o'clock bus from Normanford. About a mile out of the town, they stopped to take up a passenger, who mounted to

the roof, and took the vacant seat next John, and proved to be none other than Mr. Brackenridge, the chemist, also on his way to the station at Duke's Hill. The two men greeted each other with a hearty good-morning: to any one not absolutely his enemy, John English would have done no less. He disliked Brackenridge, and would have gone half a mile out of his way any day to avoid his company, and yet he had not been able altogether to shirk the intimacy which the other was so evidently desirous of forcing upon him. For it not unfrequently happened that in going to, or returning from, the town to his lodgings, he would be overtaken by Brackenridge, who always accommodated his pace to that of John for the remainder of the way; and unless a man is an absolute bear, he must, in such a case, speak when he is spoken to, even though his replies be confined to monosyllables. Then, again, John had been indebted to the chemist for finding him a trustworthy man to carry his apparatus when photographing about the country. There was a further bond of union between them—the bond which unites two men who are smokers, and capable of appreciating a good cigar. On two occasions, the chemist had sent Hannah into Cliff Cottage, with his compliments, and would Mr. English oblige him by accepting a dozen weeds of a choice brand? and when your next-door neighbour does that, what can you do but accept the favour with thanks? So, on the present occasion, John and Brackenridge, sitting side by side on the top of the 'bus, entered into conversation readily and at once.

Normanford lies in a valley, as does also, despite its name, the station at Duke's Hill. The hill itself is about a mile away to the north, and must be crossed by a road, which winds right over its summit, before the railway can be reached. From the highest point of this road, there is one of the finest views in all Monkshire; and here the 'bus always halts for three minutes, for the double purpose of breathing the horses, and giving the passengers time to admire the extensive prospect. From one particular spot, a glimpse of the sea can be obtained

over a break in the ridge of intervening downs, and this view was pointed out by Brackenridge to John. The sky was so unclouded this morning, and the atmosphere so clear and free from haze, that the distant line where sky and sea met was barely distinguishable.

"What is the name of that little island out there to the east?" said John. "I have seen it several times in my rambles along the shore, but have never learned its name."

"That is the Isle of Inchmallow," said the chemist. "It lies three miles from the mainland. You have never visited it, I suppose?"

"No," said John. "Why should I?"

"For no reason that I know of, except that it can boast some interesting ruins, and you have a taste that way, I understand."

"What are the ruins you speak of?"

"Those of the Hermitage of St. Bertram."

"And, pray, who was St. Bertram?"

"Oh, one of those old Romish fellows who lived a tremendous while ago. He pretended that he saw visions; and he went and lived out on the island all by himself, a sort of half-and-half Crusoe, but without a Man Friday to bear him company."

"But how did he obtain his food so far from the mainland?"

"Oh, by cultivating a patch of ground, I suppose; and by the offerings of pious folk who went out to him in boats. He lived in a hole hollowed out of the rock; and when he died, they made a saint of him, and built what they called a Hermitage over his cave, where a certain number of monks from the old abbey just beyond Eastingham used to go and reside, turn and turn about. But the Hermitage is in ruins, and has been for centuries; only, people say that the arch of the great window, and one or two other bits that are left, are as fine specimens of that sort of thing as you will find in a day's ramble. But, for my own part, I know nothing of architecture."

"I must visit the little island," said John, "and see

whether the ruins are worth sketching. What means of access are there to it?"

"Only name the day you would like to go," said the chemist warmly, "and there shall be as neat a little boat at your service as you will find within a dozen miles, together with a man to pull you there and back again."

John, who had no desire to lay himself under further obligations to the chemist, would fain have declined the offer thus pressed upon him; but Brackenridge seemed so earnest in the matter, that after doing his best to back out of it, he was obliged to yield a reluctant consent.

"If convenient, you had better name an early day for your visit," said Brackenridge. "This fine weather may not last much longer."

"To-day is Tuesday," said John. "I shall be disengaged on Friday, if that day will suit you, and the weather prove favourable."

"Friday let it be," said the chemist, as he made a note in his pocket-book. "A man and boat shall be waiting for you at 10.30 A.M. at Finger Bay—rather an out-of-the-way place, by-the-by.—Oh, you know it, do you? Then that's all right.—And now, here we are at the station."

When Mr. Brackenridge reached home that evening, his first words to his sister were: "Send down to the 'Hand and Dagger,' and tell Jerry Winch I want to see him."

"Jerry is here, waiting for you," said Hannah.

"What brings him here, I wonder? But send him in, and leave us together."

Brackenridge and Jerry were very good friends; indeed, it was through a well simulated liking for the son that the chemist had won his first step in the affections of the mother. Jerry looked up to Brackenridge as to a man of unlimited knowledge, who wielded the power of life and death in the shape of terrible drugs; and who could, if he were so minded, cause any one who offended him to wither away and die in some mysterious manner.

He came slouching in, in his usual shame-faced way, twirling his hat between his fingers, and seated himself on the extreme edge of a chair, in obedience to the chemist's bidding. Brackenridge had studied Jerry's peculiarities, and waited till the lad had swallowed a cup of tea, and devoured a couple of muffins, before asking him a single question.

"Well, Jerry, my man, and what has brought you up here?" he said at last, as the lad proceeded to rub his sleeve across his mouth.

"Pipanta is ill, and Jerry wants a charm to make her better."

"What is the matter with her ladyship?" asked the chemist.

"She refuses to eat; she refuses to dance when her lord plays sweet music; she is no longer glad, but very very melancholy."

The chemist turned from the table, and sat staring into the fire for a full quarter of an hour, without speaking, Jerry meanwhile sitting patiently twirling his hat, but with a furtive eye on the plate of muffins, momentarily growing colder on the table.

"Jerry," said the chemist, turning round at last, and speaking in a solemn voice, "Pipanta is not ill—she is enchanted!"

A low cry escaped from Jerry; he half started up in his chair, and then sat down again, trembling violently.

"Yes, enchanted—cursed by a magic spell," repeated Brackenridge. "Katafango, the great magician, has cast an evil eye upon her. Pipanta will never recover, unless——" The chemist paused, and looked earnestly at his half-witted companion; but Jerry had not sufficient sense to fill up the hiatus with the question which would have come naturally to the lips of any one else, and Brackenridge waited in vain. "Unless," he resumed, slowly and impressively—"unless Katafango, the great magician, were to die. In that case, Pipanta would certainly recover."

"Oh, tell me," cried Jerry, starting up, "where does this great magician live? Jerry will go to him, and

will pray him on his knees to spare the life of his lovely Pipanta."

The chemist laughed a loud, scornful laugh.

"You don't know what you would ask, my poor lad," he said. "Katafango is King of the Toads; and when Pipanta dies, he will take her soul, and put it into the body of a poisonous toad, and it will remain a toad for ever. And then Mogaddo will follow the same fate: the spell is on them both."

The lad started up, his mobile lips quivering with white passion, and his blue eyes all aflame. He sidled up behind Brackenridge's chair, and laying a long thin finger on the chemist's arm, said in a sort of shrill whisper—"Jerry will kill him!"

"Hush! my poor boy; you must not talk in that wild way," said Brackenridge, soothingly. "Do you know who he is—this terrible magician? You see him nearly every day."

"No. Who?" said Jerry, in an eager whisper.

"He who lives next door, who makes the sun take pictures for him—the tall man with the long black beard." Jerry fell back a foot or two in dismay. "What stranger but he," continued Brackenridge, "ever played with Pipanta as he played with her the first time he saw her? It was then he cast his spell over her. Lovely Pipanta must die."

"Pipanta shall not die!" exclaimed Jerry, all aglow with nervous excitement. "Give Jerry some of that nice white powder out of the jar on the top shelf of the shop, and Jerry will mix it with what the magician eats, and *he* shall die. Hoo, hoo, hoo!"

"Nay, nay, Jerry, my man; that would never do," said the chemist. "We cannot prevent Pipanta dying, unless——" And again he paused, and looked earnestly at Jerry. "Listen to me," he resumed. "He of whom we have been speaking is going on Friday to the island of Inchmallow, and I want you, Jerry, to row him across."

"Want Jerry to do it? No, no, no; Jerry dare not!"

"Tush, man! he has no power to harm you, or I

would not ask you to go with him. But to make everything quite sure, I will give you a charm which I have upstairs, locked up in an iron chest, with which you may set at defiance all the enchanters and witches in the world. And now come nearer—I want to talk to you seriously. You must be at Finger Bay at half-past ten on Friday morning. *He* will come there, and you will row him across to the island. And now attend carefully to what I am about to say ;” and with that the chemist’s voice sank to a whisper. Jerry, sitting motionless by his side, drank in his words eagerly.

Half an hour later, Brackenridge himself let Jerry out by the front door, and then stood listening to the lad’s retreating footsteps, as he went swiftly down the hill. “A devilish thing to do,” muttered the chemist to himself; “but I am not going to funk it now.” And as he turned to go indoors, he heard with a shudder the faint sound of Jerry’s weird laughter far down the road.

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## CHAPTER XVII.

### THE ISLAND OF INCHMALLOW.

JOHN ENGLISH, walking up from Normanford to Cliff Cottage on Thursday evening, was overtaken by Brackenridge. “Your purpose still holds good, I suppose, to go off to the island to-morrow?” said the latter, after the usual greetings. “You could not have more favourable weather—mild and bright, and no frost.”

“I have not forgotten my promise,” said John, “and I certainly intend to keep it.”

“I have arranged for a boat to be ready for you at half-past ten, as agreed on,” said the chemist. “For myself, I am going from home to-morrow, and shall not be back for nearly a week.”

A mild and genial morning was that of Friday, but less bright and sunny than the mornings of several preceding days had been, and John’s practised eye told him that a change of weather was impending. “It will hold fair till I get back,” he said, as he scanned the clouds again; and then he set off at a rapid pace on his

way to Finger Bay. The distance was only six miles and a half, and that was nothing of a walk to John English.

He had got beyond the toll-bar on the Eastringham road—beyond the toll-bar, but not quite so far as the lodge of Ashleigh Park, when he heard the approaching clatter of hoofs on the hard road behind him. He did not look round; but the sound ceased close at his elbow, and a voice that thrilled him, a voice that he loved to hear better than any other in the world, addressed him: “Mr. English, of all people in the world! Why have you been so long without coming to see us at Belair?”

John turned, and took the little hand so frankly proffered, and bared his head for a moment, as his long brown fingers closed softly over it.

“Do you not know,” he said, “that I received a polite *compte* from Lady Spencelaugh several weeks ago?”

“I know nothing of the kind,” replied Frederica; “neither can I in any way account for such treatment. Sir Philip has asked after you several times, and I was obliged to put him off with some vague excuse, being myself at a loss to understand why you had never come up to Belair since the last occasion on which you dined there.”

“You cannot be more at a loss than I am, Miss Spencelaugh, to account for my sudden dismissal.”

“It cannot be accounted for,” said Frederica. “But Lady Spencelaugh is mistress of her own house, and has the privilege of doing as she likes in such cases. And so enough of an unpleasant topic.—Will you take a commission from me, Mr. English?”

John signified how happy it would make him to do so.

“I want you to obtain for me a complete set of your Roman photographs,” said Frederica. “By what day can you get them for me!”

“I shall have to write to London for them, and can hardly get them down before Tuesday.”

“On Tuesday, then, I shall expect them. But do not send them up to the Hall, Mr. English; bring them yourself—that is, if you are not otherwise engaged. On



Tuesday, between eleven and three, remember. And now I must bid you good morning, for my way lies down here to Ashleigh Park."

"One word before you go," said John. "Sir Philip Spencelaugh—is he better than when I saw him last?"

Frederica's dark eyes turned on John with an almost tearful look. She shook her head sadly. "He is no better," she said. "He never leaves the house now. I dare not trust myself to say more. Adieu!"

John stood like one spell-bound till the last flutter of Frederica's veil was lost among the trees. He had seen her again, and she had smiled kindly on him; and he was to see her again the following week—so ran the joyous burden of his thoughts, as he went on his way through lane, and coppice, and solitary by-paths where no human being seemed to have been for years, till the ocean burst suddenly on his view; and there below him was Finger Bay, with a man pacing the beach, and a tiny boat moored to the rocks. John found a rude foot-way, by which he scrambled down to the shore; and on approaching, was surprised to find that the man he had seen was none other than Jerry Winch. "Brackenridge has surely never sent *him* to row me across to the island!" muttered John to himself.

"Good morning, Jerry," he said as he drew near. "What are you doing at this out-of-the-way spot?"

The lad took off his conical hat, and gave one of his sweeping old-fashioned bows. "Jerry is here to row the gentleman across to Inchmallow," he said.

"I was not aware that the art of rowing was among your accomplishments," said John.

"Jerry knows how to row," said the lad quietly. "He has been to Inchmallow often with people in summer-time to see the ruins. He could find his way there and back in the dark."

"In that case, we will start at once," said John, as he led the way to the boat. He was fond of rowing, and the anticipated pleasure of a good pull had been one great inducement for making the excursion. Stripping off his coat, he now took the stroke-oar, and having pulled out

into deep water, Jerry set the boat's head for Inchmallow which was only just visible this morning through the haze.

A long silent pull through the green water, swelling as gently just now as any summer sea, for there had been nearly a month of fine weather—silent, because Jerry was not talkative at the best of times, and in the presence of the great magician, which he believed John to be, it was not to be expected that he should speak except when spoken to; while John's thoughts were too bright and busy for him to care about conversation. Once or twice, while John rested on his oar for a moment, Jerry's hand wandered into the folds of his waistcoat, to feel whether the amulet, which Brackenridge had lent him as a safeguard against the machinations of the dread Katafango, was still safe. It hung by a ribbon round his neck; and the charm itself, whatever it might be, was stitched up with variegated silks in a piece of sealskin, which smelt strongly of spices and strange drugs. Armed with this potent safeguard, Jerry felt tolerably brave, and went through the duties of the occasion without falling into a state of nervous incapacity, which was what the chemist had dreaded more than anything else.

So, after a time, the mainland began to look dim and distant through the haze; and the little rocky island of Inchmallow rose pleasantly to view out of the green waste of waters. Jerry steered the boat into a little sheltered cove, and made it fast to a large boulder, and then John stepped ashore. Whatever might have been its state of cultivation at some far-distant time, the island was now wild and desolate enough to have suited the tastes of the most unsocial of hermits. It was only about a mile and a quarter in circumference, but the irregularities of its surface made it seem much larger. On three sides it presented a jagged, irregular frontage of rocks to the sea, known to frequenters of the island as "The Shark's Teeth," and ranging from ten to fifty feet above high-water mark. These rocks were fringed with a thick growth of stunted shrubs and bushes, all

with their heads turned inland from the rough wintry sea-wind. The ground inside this rocky barrier was thickly carpeted with long coarse grass, and dipped down towards a central hollow, sheltered, warm, where lay the ruins of the Hermitage.

John English, standing on the fragment of a broken pillar, took in the features of the scene. Here and there, a portion of a wall was still standing; with one or two doorways, and part of a small circular tower, with a winding staircase inside, leading originally to a belfry, or it might be, to a look-out across the sea. But beyond the arch of the chapel window, which had been spoken of by Brackenridge, and which, though small in size, was of exquisite design, there was nothing worthy of John's pencil. He had brought his materials with him, and he sat down at once on the broken pillar, and began to sketch the window. An hour later, with his pipe in his mouth, and his sketch-book under his arm, he wandered slowly back towards the shore. With the completion of his task, his thoughts had flown back to Frederica; and it was rather by instinct than by the exercise of any other faculty, that he retraced his way to the shingly cove where he had landed. The sea was at his feet: he brought himself back by an effort from the delicious dreamland in which he had been wandering, and looked around.

Jerry and the boat were gone!

But gone whither? John scrambled up on to a pinnacle of rock close by, and looked steadfastly around. There was nothing to be seen but the water in front of him, and the desolate island behind, and over everything the gray mist, growing grayer and denser as the day advanced; but nowhere either Jerry or the boat. John called aloud: "Jerry! Jerry Winch! where are you?" And then he waited breathlessly, but there came no response. "The foolish fellow has grown tired with waiting, and has gone round to some other point of the island," muttered John to himself. And with that he set off to explore the little domain, bounding lightly from rock to rock, examining carefully every

little indentation of the shore where it was possible for a boat to lurk, and calling Jerry's name at intervals. After a time, he found himself again at the point from which he had started, having gone completely round the island; and with that the conviction burst upon his mind that he had been purposely abandoned. Once more he called Jerry by name, louder than before. After a short space of breathless silence, there came a low fiendish "Hoo, hoo, hoo!" out of the mist; and then there was nothing but the dull plash of the waves on the shingle, and the straining beat of John's own heart.

He sat down on the shore, and buried his face in his hands, and his very soul seemed to sink down into a black abyss of despair, appalled by the thought of the terrible fate in store for him. Death by starvation and hunger—such was to be his doom. During the summer months, hardly a week passed without the island being visited by one or more pleasure-parties; but at that dead season of the year, no sane person would ever think of visiting so desolate a spot; and John knew enough of that dangerous coast to be aware that passing ships gave its hidden dangers as wide a berth as possible, and never, even in the fairest weather, ventured within hailing distance of Inchmallow. Whether his abandonment resulted from the working of some black tortuous thought in Jerry's own addled brain, or whether the simpleton had been incited to the evil deed by others, was a matter on which it were useless just then to speculate. John remembered, with a pang of regret, that he had not mentioned his intention of visiting Inchmallow to any one except Brackenridge, and the chemist had gone from home for several days. As for Mrs. Jakeway, she would doubtless grow uneasy after a time at her lodger's continued absence. But then, John had always been an unaccountable mortal, and had not unfrequently left his lodgings for two or three days together, without giving his landlady any previous intimation of his intentions. Nay, even supposing that the old lady grew alarmed at his non-return, where, or of whom, was she to make inquiry about him? If she

went to the police—what then? John was sufficiently acquainted with Jerry Winch's mental peculiarities to know that the simpleton could keep a secret, if it were to his interest to do so, with more than the cunning of a sane man. He could not help admitting that his chance of rescue was a very faint one. Months might pass away before Inchmallow were visited by a single soul; while a few days, ten or twelve at the outside, would put an end to all his troubles. This was not the first time he had borne hunger and privation. His frame was strong and hardy, and his constitution good; and he knew that he was better calculated than most people to stand such an ordeal, which, however, in the present case, meant nothing more than a prolongation of suffering, for even the strongest must succumb at last. And Frederica—would she ever know his fate? Yes; weeks, or it might be months hence, when his body was found, the news would spread, and would penetrate even within the guarded precincts of Belair; and she would learn then why he had never fulfilled her commission. She would feel sorry for him, of course; her gentle nature would not admit of anything else: simply sorry, and nothing more. While he?—But it were better not to let such thoughts carry him too far; so he arose at once, and broke away from his reverie, and started to make a careful exploration of his little domain. In less than a couple of hours, he had completely exhausted it, but had found nothing whatever in his search that would contribute in any way to support human life. Fortunately, his flask was full of sherry, and he had four hard biscuits in his pocket. An ounce of Cavendish tobacco, a meerschau pipe, and a box of fusees, completed the list of his possessions. He was dressed in a suit of stout winter tweed, and a Glogarry bonnet; but had no overcoat, or other extra protection against the weather.

A careful examination of the ruins had shown him a small cavernous opening among the foundations of the crumbling tower. It was only about four feet in height, arched over with brick-work, and having a floor com-

posed of dry sandy earth. John thought himself fortunate in finding in its furthest corner a heap of dry bracken, which had been put there by some unknown person, for some unknown purpose, and which he at once appropriated for his bed. Here, when the short winter-day had come to an end, and John had given up all hope of rescue till the morrow, he coiled himself up in the dark, like a wild beast in its lair, and went to sleep. His wandering life had given him this advantage—that he could go to sleep anywhere. He awoke about two o'clock—he read off the time on his watch by the light of a fusce—and crawled out of his den to consult the weather. Fog—everywhere fog; hiding earth, sea, and sky behind its dull, dank curtain. With a shiver, John crept back to bed; but sleep refused to come a second time, and he lay tossing with wide open eyes till the tardy daylight, yellow and sickly, looked in upon him. Then he got up, and walked down to the shore.

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## CHAPTER XVIII.

### THE WOMAN IN GRAY.

Fog, everywhere fog; not so thick as it had been in the middle of the night, but thicker than on the previous day, and shutting him in at a distance of forty or fifty yards as with an impenetrable wall. John English could not help a sinking of the heart when he looked around; his prospect of escape seemed to him, just then, even more remote than on the previous day. A pipe of Cavendish constituted his breakfast. He felt ravenously hungry, but he fought against the feeling, buckling the belt round his waist a little tighter, and determined to reserve his wine and biscuits till his need should be still greater. There was a broken fountain among the ruins, from which a little streamlet still welled forth, as cold and pure as when, centuries ago, the monks first enshrined it in carven stone, and filled their pitchers with its limpid freshness; and it now served John both for drinking and washing purposes. It was no use, he thought, dawdling about all day, doing nothing

and letting the fog chill him to the marrow ; so he set about a systematic course of pedestrian exercise, walking from one side of the island to the other at a quick pace, and then back. This he did, with short intervals of rest, till night came on again. A mouthful of sherry, half a biscuit, a pipe of tobacco, and then to bed. He was thoroughly tired out, and slept soundly.

The third day : Sunday No change in the weather. The fog still as heavy as before. This day was passed by John as the preceding one had been. Allowance of wine and biscuit as before. The influence of the day seemed to make itself felt even on that lonely isle ; John felt more humble-minded and resigned to his fate than he had hitherto done.

The fourth day : Monday No change, except that the fog seemed a little lighter than on the previous day. John kept up his exercise, but was obliged to rest longer and more frequently than before. He caught himself once or twice waking up from a sort of half-stupor as he walked, in which he had forgotten where he was, and had fancied himself going about his ordinary avocations at Normanford. That feeling of ravenous hunger which had tormented him so much previously, now came on at intervals only ; but in its stead he was racked with strange pains, which caught him suddenly, and tortured him almost beyond endurance for a time, and then left him as unexpectedly as they had come.

John was awakened before day-break, on the morning of the fifth day, by the loud thunder of the waves as they broke on the rocky shore of the little island. He crept out of his den, and stumbled his way down to the beach. The fog was still as thick as ever, and the morning was perfectly calm ; but a heavy sea was rolling grandly in with the morning tide, and John knew at once that there had been a great storm out on the Atlantic, perhaps a thousand miles away, of which these angry waves were the only traces that would reach so far. His hunger this morning was so extreme that he could not help giving way to it a little by indulging in a double allowance of wine and biscuit. But even with

this assistance, he found himself considerably weaker than he had yet been, and could only get through about half the amount of exercise he had set himself to do. Once he fancied himself with Sir Philip Spenceclough, walking in the great park of Belair; and when he shook off the hallucination, and came back to the reality of his position, he could not stifle the sob that burst from his heart. Sometimes he would murmur to himself, half aloud: "I shall die, and she will never know how truly I have loved her;" but beyond that he was silent. Nearly three hours of this day were devoted by him to writing down in his pocket-book an account of how he came to be left on the island. After that, he gave a brief outline of his history from childhood; concluding with the narration, in as few words as possible, of what had happened to him, affecting his personal history, since his arrival at Normanford. He also gave the addresses of two friends who were to be written to, and who would see to the proper disposal of his remains. He sat for a long time when his task was done, musing sadly, on a sheltered seat he had found among the rocks on the beach; watching, with thoughts that were far away, the great green waves rolling in with a regularity that was grand from its very monotony. He felt now as though he had almost done with earth—as though he were at liberty to turn his thoughts to higher subjects. But through all his musings the image of Frederica moved, serene and beautiful, leading his mind upward, even as Dante was led by saintly Beatrice, to heights sweet and solemn, fragrant with airs from Heaven, where earthly tempests never rave.

He sat thus till the afternoon began to darken, and then he rose and wandered slowly towards the ruins. But his cramps came on by the way, and he was obliged to sit down, and wait in silent agony till they left him. It seemed to him, to-day, that all the way as he walked back to the ruins he was followed by a ghostly monk—a monk in a black robe, and sandalled shoon, who walked behind him with bowed head, counting his beads; stopping when John stopped; starting again the



instant that he started; never looking up, but going through his rosary slowly, bead by bead, and then beginning afresh. Although John knew it to be merely a delusion of his own weakened senses, he could not resist the shudder that ran through him whenever he glanced over his shoulder, and saw the dark, weird figure following noiselessly behind—and such backward glances were very frequent. His head seemed to go round without any will of his own in the matter. He turned and confronted the figure, and it stood motionless with downcast head, except that its fingers were still busy with its beads. He advanced towards it, and as he did so, it retreated, still keeping the same relative distance between them. He tried once or twice, by stopping suddenly, to catch the light pit-pat of its footfall—if it had any; but the very instant that John stopped, it stopped, and was evidently not to be caught by so palpable a device. Half laughing, half shuddering at his own folly in being thus terrified by a mere spectral illusion, John quickened his pace; and a few minutes later he crept in at the door of his den, and flung himself on his bed of bracken with a sigh of relief. He looked up after a time, and the figure was there, sitting in the doorway, still busy with its beads. Although nearly dark by this time, he could see it plainly, by some inner light, as it seemed, that emanated from itself.

After a long silent stare, John said slowly, between his set teeth: “I think I know how to exorcise you, my boy—at least for the present.” With that he took up his flask, and drained off his last modicum of sherry, and then set to work to munch his last biscuit, keeping his eyes meanwhile turned steadfastly away from the spot where the figure was sitting. When he had eaten the last crumb, he turned to look for the figure. It was gone. With a laugh that seemed far more dreary than any tears would have done, he lay down on his rude bed, for he felt very weak and weary, and remembered nothing more.

Once again he awoke, some time towards the middle of the night, and this time with a strange sound in his

ears - a loud shrill whistle, repeated again and again in quick succession. He started up on his bed, and then, still doubting the accuracy of his senses, stumbled out into the open air. For the first time since his sojourn on the island, the night was comparatively light, for although the fog still hung low and heavy, the moon, no longer hidden by thick clouds, shone brightly through it, and transfused it into a silvery haze. Again that sound—loud, clear, and shrill. Surely it must emanate from some living being. John's heart beat thickly, and for a moment or two both eyes and limbs failed him, as he sank half-fainting to the ground. A minute to recover himself somewhat, and then up and away, as fast as he could go, in the direction from which the sound came. He tried to shout, but could not; and so, breathing hard, and stumbling, and then stopping a moment to listen, he at length overtopped the little sand-ridge, and came down on the "shining levels" of the beach. What his first glance showed him there might well have been taken by him for another phantom of a weakened brain. A dark, hooded figure, less tall than the first one, with something pendent from its waist, which it lifted ever and anon to its lips, and blew shrilly, and then stopped, as if waiting for some answering signal. As John came into view, the figure waved its hand to him to advance; and then he saw a little boat moored close behind, and felt that he was saved; and a great throb of gratitude for his deliverance went up to Heaven. "Come!" said the figure, with another wave of its hand, as he drew nearer. "I am here to save you. Do not delay, or we shall miss the turn of the tide."

It was a woman's voice that spoke, but it came with a muffled sound out of the gray hood, which left no feature visible by that dim light, and John failed to recognize it. Still like a man in a dream, John stepped into the boat, and seated himself on the cushioned seat indicated by his guide. The woman followed, and a vigorous push with the oar sent the boat from land. "In that basket at your feet you will find something to

eat and drink ; but after so long a fast, you must be careful not to take too much."

A minute or two later, the Isle of Inchmallow faded ghostlike in the mist.

The hooded woman pulled slowly and steadily, and the tide helped them on their way. "It must surely be a blissful dream," thought John, as he lay back with closed eyes on the cushions of the boat. Who was this woman that had come so mysteriously to his rescue ? He asked himself the question once or twice, but he had not sufficient energy left to be strongly curious even on that point. Just then, he cared for little or nothing except the one great fact, that he was saved, and that he should see Frederica again. Soon the great cliffs of the mainland loomed dimly into view. "Let me at least know the name of my preserver," said John, as he stepped ashore in obedience to a gesture from his conductress.

"That you must never know," said the woman in gray ; "and you cannot serve me better than by not attempting to learn it."

"Is there no other method left me of showing my gratitude ?" asked John, earnestly.

"Yes ; one thing more you can do to oblige me. Do not strive to punish the simpleton by whose foolish act you so nearly lost your life. Let him go in peace ; he knew no better. And now, farewell. Behind yonder turn of the road, you will find a little country inn. Go there, and knock the people up ; they will gladly take you in. There stay till you are strong enough to return home. Farewell."

She pushed off before he could say a word in reply ; and presently the fog took her and the boat, and he saw them no more.

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## CHAPTER XIX.

### A MUTE WITNESS.

NEARLY a month had passed quietly away at the little station-house at Kingsthorpe, and nothing more had been

seen or heard of Mr. Henri Duplessis, or of Madame his sister—Abel Garrod began to allude to them less frequently in his conversation—an omission by no means displeasing to his wife. For Abel had a habit of dwelling on one topic day after day, long after it was worn threadbare for conversational purposes, in a way that sometimes tried Jane's patience severely. To any other person it would have seemed as if the little drama, one scene of which had been enacted under that humble roof, had certainly come to an end, so far as the station-master and his wife were concerned, whatever other "business" might remain to be done by the more important personages of the play. Such, indeed, would have been the case, had Jane Garrod been a woman of ordinary calibre—glad to make a few shillings by the letting of her rooms; pleased at being able to oblige so fine a gentleman as Mr. Duplessis; and to have for an inmate of her house a lady of such distinguished manners, albeit of somewhat shabby appearance, as his sister—experiencing for a few days a sort of indolent gratification that the wearisome uniformity of her life had been so pleasantly broken; and then dismissing the whole subject to the recesses of a shallow memory, whence it would rarely be evoked again. But Jane Garrod was a woman of far different stamp—a woman of strong nerve; of an intense, silent, brooding temperament; not impressionable, or readily receptive of new ideas, but very tenacious of any idea which her mind had once thoroughly grasped.

There were several reasons why she should brood over this episode of Mr. Duplessis and his sister. In the first place, she thoroughly disliked the man. With rare intuitive perception, she seemed to see right through the smiling mask which he wore before the world, down into the twilight depths of his nature; and perhaps the view was not a reassuring one. Then, again, her dislike was deepened by the fact of his aspiring so persistently to the hand of the heiress of Belair; for all Jane's sympathies on that score went with handsome young Lord Blencowan, the Nimrod of the county, who did not, however, seem to take Frederica's refusal of him

very much to heart. Other reasons there were why the subject should be one not to be readily dismissed from her mind. From the moment when, with the assistance of the pocket-telescope, she had witnessed the meeting of Mr. Duplessis and Madame on the platform, she had become possessed by a suspicion which she had not mentioned to any one; a suspicion afterwards turned almost into a certainty, when she pieced together in her memory the many strange scraps of conversation which she had picked up, by accident as it were, while waiting upon her guests. So she went quietly about her household duties, pondering much, but speaking not at all of the things deepest in her thoughts. And thus matters progressed till a certain Sunday morning, three weeks after the departure of Madame, when Jane announced to her husband her intention of walking over to the church at Normanford, and attending service there. Normanford was about six miles from Kingsthorpe; and its church being the fashionable one of the neighbourhood, was attended by the family from the Hall, and, consequently, by Mr. Duplessis.

Jane Garrod, from her seat in the second row of the gallery, could, by craning over a little, obtain a good back-view of Mr. Duplessis. Yes, there he sat, stood, knelt, according to the requirements of the service; consummately dressed; serious and devout in demeanour—but Madame his sister was certainly not by his side, neither could Jane see her among the company that quitted the church. What she did see was Mr. Duplessis whirled away in the Belair carriage, Sir Philip Spence-laugh being evidently well pleased to have him by his side; although there was nothing of pleasure discernible in the pale statuesque face of Frederica, gazing out, with a far-away look in her eyes, from the opposite corner.

That same Sunday evening, Jane's niece, Kitty, came down from the Hall to drink tea, and have a good gossip with her aunt, who had prepared for the occasion some tempting cakes of a kind the young waiting-woman was especially fond of, as a certain method of rendering her good-tempered and communicative. When

tea was over, and Abel had gone to the station to look after his evening train, Kitty opened her budget of news. Jane allowed the chatterbox's tongue to run itself down in a florid description of certain articles of millinery which Miss Spenceclough had received from town during the past week, before she attempted to turn the current of the girl's thoughts into the particular channel in which she wished them to run.

"Has Mr. Duplessis been up at the Hall as much as ever during the past three weeks?" asked Jane, at the first sign of a lull.

"This week and last week he was up nearly every day, more or less. The week before that, we hardly saw anything of him."

"How was that? Was he away from home?"

"No, not away from home," said Kitty. "Quite different from that, by his own account to Master, when they met together at the corner of the terrace, yesterday was a fortnight, and me within hearing behind the dairy-window all the time. I remember the day, because I broke a tea-cup out of the best set that very afternoon. Says Master to Mr. Duplessis: 'We've not seen you up at Belair for nearly a week. What have you been doing with yourself all the time?' To which Mr. Duplessis makes answer that he has been laid up at home ever since Tuesday with the tic something or other in his face; but that he is better now. And then they go off together to look at the big vine in the conservatory."

"Mr. Duplessis made no mention to Sir Philip of any lady, I suppose?" said Jane.

"Any lady! No. Why should he? He wouldn't care to talk much about any other lady than Miss Frederica, I guess; and she doesn't care twopence about him."

"Then she has not quite learned to love him yet?"

"No, nor never will, for all he's so handsome and smiling. I don't think Mr. Duplessis ever mentions a word to her about love or marriage, but keeps on trying to win her, as I call it, without letting her know that she is being won. It reminds me of the way my bro-

ther Dick used to catch sparrows, which, as everybody knows, are awful cunning birds. They would hop round the trap, with their heads perked on one side, as if they knew all about it, but always getting nearer and nearer, till they grew so familiar with the danger as almost to despise it, but still resolute not to enter; till all at once, and before they knew what was the matter, they would find the trap dropped gently over them, and their last chance of escape gone. Now, for all the world, that's just like Mr. Duplessis and Miss Frederica."

"On the Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday of that week," said Jane to herself, when Kitty had come to a stand for want of breath, "Mr. Duplessis was not confined to his house by *tic-douloureux*, but was backward and forward here in attendance on Madame. He said, when he took her away, that he was going to take her on a visit to some friends. It is very evident that among those friends the people of Belair are not included. Where do those friends live, I wonder? and to what place has he taken her?"

It was on the night of this same Sunday that Jane Garrod first dreamed about Madame Marie. She thought that she was following her along a gloomy and tortuous road, that wound in and out among great desolate hills and thunder-riven cliffs, when suddenly the woman before her disappeared in a hidden gulf. As Jane started back with a cry of horror, the face of Duplessis rose close before her own, the handsome features distorted with a grin of fiendish triumph, and the forehead dashed with a streak of blood. Jane awoke trembling with affright, and slept no more that night. Other omens were not wanting. On the Monday morning, a wandering tinker called at the station-house, who ground and sharpened Jane's scissors. But when, in the afternoon, Jane wanted to make use of them, she found that they would not cut—an infallible sign that something had happened to somebody. Then, again, on the third morning after her dream, as she was looking out of her bed-room window while dressing, she saw a black cat on the station wall—a black cat of portentous size,

which turned and bit its own tail three times, and then leaped down and disappeared. Neither Abel nor the lame porter saw this cat, nor was any such animal known to exist in the neighbourhood.

If Jane Garrod had heard any one term her a superstitious woman, she would have scouted the imputation indignantly. But she had been brought up in a part of the country, and among people, where implicit credence was placed in dream-lore, in omens, and apparitions; and the influences of early training were not quite eradicated. Jane affected, even to herself, to attach no weight to her strange dream; but, in addition to the other omens spoken of above, it doubtless served to develop more rapidly a purpose which had been slowly ripening in her mind for some time. And so another uneventful week drew to a close.

On Saturday morning, Jane announced her intention of going over to Fairwood to make her usual monthly purchases of groceries and other household stores. Fairwood is eight miles from Kingsthorpe; and Jane's practice was to walk over early in the morning—for she was country-bred, and thought nothing of the distance; to spend the day in making her purchases, and in paying brief visits to sundry old friends, returning home with her goods in the carrier's cart late in the afternoon. From this custom she did not intend to deviate in the present instance. She had not forgotten that the high-bodied gig in which Mr. Duplessis took his sister away from the station had struck her at the time as being the property of Luke Grayling, landlord of the "Silver Lion" at Fairwood. Now, Luke's wife and Jane Garrod had been school-girls together; and the latter rarely visited Fairwood without calling at the "Silver Lion," where a hearty welcome always awaited her, and an invitation to whatever meal might be in progress at the time—and there generally was some meal in progress, call when you might, at the "Silver Lion."

On this particular Saturday, Jane contrived to get through her shopping and visiting earlier than usual, so as to be in time for the three o'clock tea, in which Mrs.



Grayling always indulged on market-days, as a meal that came in readily in the interval between the country business of the morning and the town custom of the evening. Mrs. Grayling greeted her old friend warmly, and the two were presently seated at the tea-table, gossiping over times past and present. Jane did not exactly see her way to bring round the conversation to the wished-for point; but a remark made by her hostess at length enabled her to lead up to it without subjecting herself to being questioned on a topic respecting which she would just then much rather be silent.

"I suppose we shall have a grand wedding before long," said Mrs. Grayling, "between this Mr. Duplessis and the young lady at Belair?"

"That's more than I can say," replied Jane. "Have you ever seen Mr. Duplessis?"

"Only once, and that was a month ago, last Thursday," answered the landlady; "and a right nice-looking gentleman he is. He came early in the afternoon, and hired our new gig and the gray mare, and drove away in a style which showed that he knew how to handle the reins. I should most likely have asked him his name, for one doesn't like trusting one's best horse to a stranger, however fine he may be dressed; only our hostler's lad, who was in the stables at Belair before he came to the 'Silver Lion,' knew him again in a moment. Says he to me: 'That's Mr. Duplessis, of Lilac Lodge—him as is going to marry the rich Miss Spencelaugh.' So, when I heard that, I just slipped on my best cap, and ran down into the yard—for Luke was out—to see that everything was right for him; and most polite and affable he were."

"He brought back the horse and gig all right, and without accident, I suppose?" said Jane.

"Bless you, yes. He got back the same night about seven o'clock. He came back the same as he went—alone. I thought he looked rather pale and excited-like; and I noticed that one of his gloves was split right across the back, and his hat damaged a little; and that his light overcoat, which, on his return, he wore buttoned

close up about his neck, seemed on one side as if it had been dragged along a dirty road. But he accounted for all that naturally enough by saying that he had been out with some friends, one of whom had taken rather too much wine, and had afterwards got larking, and damaged the hats and coats of the others all round. He laughed heartily while he was telling me; and said something about bright eyes and a pretty cap, which made my colour come so that I ran back into the house, leaving the hostler to settle with him; and I didn't see him again."

Jane Garrod sipped her tea, and pondered in silence for a minute or two over what she had just heard.

"But the strangest part of the story is yet to come," said Mrs. Grayling after a short pause, bending over the table, and speaking in a whisper. "I haven't spoken about it to a soul, though it has troubled my mind a good deal. Even Luke doesn't know of it; and I wouldn't mention it to you, Jane Garrod, if I didn't know of old that you are a woman who can keep a secret."

Mrs. Grayling rose from her chair as she spoke, and went to a cupboard in one corner of the room, and took from it a work-box. This she unlocked, and drawing something from a secret drawer, held up the article for Jane to look at.

"A woman's blood-stained handkerchief!" exclaimed Mrs. Grayling in a whisper; "marked in one corner with the name of 'Marie.' It was found by Tim the hostler under the seat of the gig, the day after Mr. Duplessis was here."

Jane felt all the colour desert her cheeks as she gazed in silent horror at the handkerchief, knowing well whose property it had been.

"There is this fact to be borne in mind," said Mrs. Grayling, after she had returned the handkerchief to its hiding-place—"that the gig had been used, as one of a number of other conveyances, at a large picnic, the day before Mr. Duplessis hired it, and had not been thoroughly cleaned between times. And it's as likely as not, I think, that the handkerchief belonged to one of the young ladies

who were at the party; though how it came to be in that condition, of course I can't say. Anyhow, both Tim and I agreed to say nothing about it—that is, unless we heard of somebody being missing. For, you see, it might only get innocent folk into trouble, and turn out a mare's-nest after all; and altogether it's an unpleasant matter to have anything to do with. What's your opinion?"

"I think that you are right," said Jane; "but I would keep the handkerchief carefully by me. Some day, when you least expect such a thing, it may be wanted at your hands."

The Kingsthorpe carrier, that evening, set down Jane Garrod as very poor company indeed. A sociable, neighbourly gossip, in his opinion, enlivened the dulness of the way wonderfully. But for once, even the vacuity of his own mind seemed pleasanter to him than the presence of that pale, gloomy, pre-occupied woman, who responded to all his observations in monosyllables, and who looked, as he said to himself, "as if she had got a murder on her mind;" and he was not sorry when he set her down at her own door, and jogged on his way alone.

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## CHAPTER XX.

### JANE GARROD'S QUEST.

ABEL GARROD was struck next day with the pale, anxious looks of his wife, and thought to himself that she was getting to talk less than ever, which was decidedly a pity, as tending, in his opinion, to make life duller than it need be. But, well or ill, Jane went to church twice that Sunday—not to the church at Normanford, but to the little church at Kingsthorpe, only half a mile away; thinking, perhaps, thereby to calm her thoughts, and tranquillize her mind. But, for once, the service took no hold on her, the words seeming to float far away above her head, as though addressed to quite other ears than hers. Do what she might, her thoughts would go back to that terrible token hidden away in the landlady's work-box at Fairwood; and whichever way she turned, she seemed to see before her Marie's pale frightened face,

as she had seen it in that last moment ere it passed from her sight for ever. Monday was spent by Jane in a silent inward struggle—the whole of the day, and far into the night. Abel, waking up some time in the dark hours, found his wife pacing to and fro in the bed-room, and heard her muttering strange words to herself.

“I can hold out no longer,” she said. “I must go on with it. An invisible hand draws me forward, and I cannot resist. Oh! why was not this task given to another?”

Abel marvelled greatly, but being wise in his own dull way, asked no questions, and pretended to be asleep.

Any one going from Kingsthorpe to Fairwood has the choice of two roads by which to travel. The old road is straggling and tortuous, but tolerably level; and winds pleasantly along for a mile or two of the way, close to the high cliffs which shut out the sea on that part of the coast. By it, the distance between the two places is eleven miles and a half. The new road cuts straight across country, regardless of hill or dale; and although by no means so picturesque as the old road, has this great advantage over its rival, that it makes the distance to Fairwood but eight miles and a quarter, and has, in consequence, monopolised the whole of the traffic between the two places; for Fairwood is not touched by the railway. About half a mile before reaching Fairwood, the two roads, old and new, merge into one, and are here joined by the road from Berryhill and other inland towns; at which junction a toll-bar has been judiciously planted, with a thoughtful eye on the pockets of all, not being foot-passengers, who may choose to come or go by any of the three routes. To the garrulous graybeard who administered the office of collector at the toll-bar, went Jane Garrod on the afternoon of Tuesday. Jane's visit was made with a purpose; but she was too cautious to let the old man—with whom she had one of those state-of-the-weather acquaintanceships, common enough between people who live wide apart in country places—suspect anything of the kind. During the summer and autumn months, the old man had generally a store of

mild ginger-beer in thick stone bottles, set out at his door for the delectation of thirsty wayfarers. Jane, when she reached the gate this afternoon, bade the old man good-day, and then asked to be supplied with a bottle of the beverage in question; and sat down in the roomy porch, that she might rest herself, and discuss it with the amount of leisure requisite for its proper appreciation. The afternoon was close and warm for the time of the year, and Jane was really tired with her long walk.

"It's a long tramp, Mrs. Garrod, all the way from Kingsthorpe, at your time o' life—not that you be so very old either," said Matthew, as he drew the cork with a trembling hand.

"Ay, that it is," answered Jane; "and I never walk it without wishing I could afford to keep my carriage, and ride like a lady. It would be pleasant, now, to have Luke Grayling's gig on such a day as this. A nice trap to ride in. I dare say you know it?"

"Ay, I know the trap you mean well enow," said Matthew. "It has been through this gate more than once, or twice either."

"It's not much used, I think, except for picnics and pleasure-parties," said Jane.

"I dun know about that," said Matthew. "I seen it with a young couple in it going a-pleasuring, more than once; and then again, I seen it t'other way. Why, no longer ago than last Thursday night was a month, about half after six, a gent druv up in it all alone, and the moment I clapt eyes on it, I knew it was Luke Grayling's turn-out. 'And where be you sprung from?' ses I to myself. 'You came down th'owd road from Kingsthorpe, but I never seen you go that way this morning.' And then I settled that he must have gone round by Leavenworth, which would account for my not seeing him pass my way. While I was turning the matter over in my mind, the gent paid me the toll, and had got a fair start again, when he turned the horse's head round, and druv back. 'I've had a spill,' ses he to me, 'and got into the mud. I don't like going into Fairwood this figure; and if you can find me some soap and water, and a clothes-brush, and

will hold my horse for five minutes, I'll give you half a crown for your trouble.' Now, it isn't every day that I've the chance of earning half a crown in five minutes. So I nodded my head to him, and got him the soap and water; and then he got down from the gig, and I saw that his hands and face were all muddy, and his hat crushed, and his coat dirty into the bargain. So I minded the horse, while he titivated hisself up a bit; and he gave me the half-crown all right, and druv off. And I've never clapt eyes on him since."

"Some young spark, most likely, who didn't know how to drive properly," said Jane.

"Not so young, either," said the old man. "About forty, I should take him to be. A fine, handsome gent as ever I clapt eyes on; with long moustachers, and a dust-coloured overcoat buttoned up to his throat. He seemed to me to look very white and ill. He had likely hurt hisself with falling out of the trap; though how he could fall out I can't think. He asked me whether I had any brandy in the house; but I told him I had only ginger-beer, and wanted him to try a bottle. But he only laughed, and shook his head, and said it was no matter."

The old man had nothing more to tell. Bidding him good day, Jane went on her way to Fairwood, from which place she booked herself by coach to Berryhill, and went home thence by rail.

She was up and doing next morning an hour before her usual time, so as to get through her household work as early as possible, anxiously considering meanwhile what her next step ought to be. Now that she had thoroughly made up her mind to go through with this matter, she was determined not to flinch from anything that it might lead to. She felt, indeed, as though she were being led on by a will other than, and superior to, her own. The one point of the case, as it then stood, on which her mind most persistently dwelt, embodied itself in the following proposition:

"Mr. Duplessis left Kingsthorpe, in company with his sister, at half-past three o'clock in the afternoon,

taking the coast-road, probably as being more unfrequented than the other—a road which has no lanes or by-paths leading to anywhere, except to one or two solitary sheep-farms among the hills. He did not reach the toll-bar till half-past six, and then alone, and with evident traces of a struggle on his clothes and person. Allowing an hour and a half as ample time for the drive between the two places, how was Mr. Duplessis employed during the remainder of the time, and what had become of Madame in the interim ? ”

On the road itself, if anywhere, she must look for the further unravelment of the mystery, whose dread presence haunted her by day and night.

She set out as soon as her early dinner was over, outwardly as calm and impassive as ever, but trembling inwardly with vague fears, that grew in proportion with the vagueness of her search. For when she put the question steadily to herself: “What am I going to look for?” she could only reply: “I do not know, and I dare not guess; but I feel that I must go on till the end, even though I should never know peace of mind again.”

The old round-about coast-road to Fairwood turned sharply off to the left about half a mile from Kingsthorpe Station, becoming all at once muddy and picturesque, and seeming as though it had left civilisation miles behind it. Jane knew every inch of the way. When a girl, she had traversed it scores of times with her mother. She knew it, for three miles of its course, as a road overshadowed with moss-grown trunks and interlacing boughs; shut in by high green banks, the chosen haunt of primrose and violet. She knew it further on, where it came suddenly out of hiding, out on to the bare summits of the cliffs, open to every wind that blew, with the unquiet sea fretting far below; knew it here for a road unfenced, and dangerous for strangers to traverse on dark nights, when to wander three yards from the beaten track would be sudden destruction to man or beast. She knew it still further on, towards the end of its course, where it deserted the sea and the breezy sheep-walks; and shut itself in between decorous stone

walls; and parted with some of its mud and all its picturesqueness; and succeeded in mending its ways, and in becoming thoroughly dull and commonplace.

With slow steps and anxious eyes, Jane Garrod traversed this road as far as the first stone wall, and then back again. "Nothing to-day, nothing to-day," she muttered to herself with a sigh of relief as she turned wearily into the house.

She passed next day quietly within doors. But the day following that, a fever of unrest began to burn once more in her veins, and she felt that there was no peace for her till one more effort, at least, had been made to solve the dark mystery which seemed to have shut out for ever her old happy frame of mind. Again, with slow steps and anxious eyes, she traversed the old coach-road, as far as the first stone wall, without discovering the slightest token such as she half-expected, yet dreaded to find. When she had got about half-way on her return, she felt compelled to sit down and rest for a few minutes; anxiety of mind seemed of late to have weakened her bodily strength. She knew the point from which the finest view on the whole road could be obtained, and as she was now close to it, she made for it instinctively. It was the headland called Martell's Leap. It stood boldly out from the ordinary cliff-line on that part of the coast, and was clothed at its summit with short fine grass, while its white scarred front had an almost perpendicular fall of more than two hundred feet to the boulder-strewn beach below. It was called "Martell's Leap" because, as the story ran, more than a century before, a certain Squire Martell rode his horse over the brink in a fit of madness, and was dashed to pieces at the foot. Jane sat down on the grass close to the edge of the cliff, and loosened her bonnet-strings, and rested her aching head in her hands. She closed her eyes, and went back in memory to the time—more than thirty years before—when she and her mother, coming from one of the lone moorland farms, used to ride in a clumsy country cart along that road to market, and never passed the headland without



a shudder at the thought of the mad squire's terrible leap.

Jane's reverie was interrupted by the barking of a distant sheep-dog. She opened her eyes, and gazed out sea-ward, and drank in the full beauty of the scene. Far away, on the very verge of the horizon, there was a trailing pennon of smoke from some home-coming steamer; and nearer at hand, the sea-birds were wheeling and screaming; but no other sign of life on sea or shore. She had been gazing for a minute or two down the face of the cliff, in a vague, purposeless sort of way, when her wandering glance was caught by a pretty red flower, growing about half-way down; but broke suddenly away from that, attracted by something fluttering in the breeze—something twisted round a bramble a foot or two below where she was sitting. As she looked, her eyes dilated, and her heart seemed to stand still, and she grasped the grass with both her hands, to keep herself from falling. What was it that she saw?

A fragment of a woman's dress!

As soon as she had recovered in some measure from the surprise of this discovery, she took off her bonnet and shawl, and stretching herself out at full length on the grass, drew her body half over the edge of the precipice; and reaching down with one hand, she succeeded, after several attempts, in grasping the fragment of silk, and in getting safely back again. Then she sat down, and rubbed the silk gently between her hands, and cried a while silently; and then she went sorrowfully home.

Her quest was ended. She had gone as far as she durst go. From that point, other and more competent hands must take up the clue which she so thankfully laid down, and work out the dark story to its end.

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## CHAPTER XXI.

MR. DUPLESSIS WINS THE GAME.

THE master of Belair had been sick almost unto death, but was now slowly recovering. The hush of dread ex-

pectancy, which had brooded like an ominous cloud over the Hall and its inmates, so long as the life of Sir Philip was in danger, had already become as a shadow of the past: and the well-trained household had imperceptibly glided back into the easy noiseless groove which circled the dull round of every-day duties at Belair. Yes, the baronet was slowly recovering. He was "much—very much better," were the exact words which, emanating, in the first instance, in the discreetest of whispers, from the lips of Dr. Roach, spread rapidly from mouth to mouth as something that everybody was glad to hear; for the sick man was universally beloved. But Dr. Roach knew, and Sir Philip knew, that this attack, conquered with difficulty, was merely the forerunner of other attacks still more severe, before which the failing forces of life must ultimately succumb.

Gaston Spencelaugh had been summoned from Paris—an effeminately handsome young man, more at home in the drawing-room than the hunting-field, and fonder of a billiard-cue than a horse—who, now that all immediate danger to his father was over, went mooning listlessly about the house, smoking interminable cigars, thinking a good deal of some absent Fifiue, and voting the whole business which had called him from pleasant Paris, a bore.

"You may be sure, dear, that it has been a very harassing time for your Marguerite," wrote Lady Spencelaugh to one of her confidential correspondents. "Poor dear Sir Philip has required constant attention night and day; and although not equal to the task of nursing him myself, I have felt it incumbent on me to be constantly on the spot, and to superintend personally every arrangement for his comfort. Gaston, dear fellow! is at home: very handsome, though it is I who say it; and with a style quite *comme il faut*." In writing thus, her Ladyship had considerably magnified her slight attentions to the sick man, which had merely consisted in three or four visits each day to the room where he lay; on which occasions she would take a momentary

glance at him, and murmur to the attendants: "Poor dear Sir Philip! How distressing to see him thus!" Then turning to the head-nurse, she would add: "Be sure, Mrs. Smith, that you carry out the doctor's instructions minutely; and let me be apprised the moment you see a change either one way or the other." And so would glide softly back to her own apartments, where she would sit by the fire with a screen in her hand, for she was always careful of her complexion, and muse on what might come to pass in case Sir Philip should not recover. "With my savings and his father's, Gaston would be tolerably well off, and could afford to make a very decent figure in London society. He would go into Parliament, of course, when he had sown his wild oats; and there is no reason why he should not marry into the peerage; and then —— Well, well."

But Sir Philip Spencelaugh, although thus neglected in one instance, was not left entirely to the care of hirelings. The watchful eye and tender hand of Frederica were ever near him. She had a room fitted up for herself close to his own, that she might be always on the spot; and her loving face was the first that met his gaze when his feeble senses flickered back to a consciousness of earthly things. He blessed her as he lay thus, and called her his own, his darling. They were the first words he had spoken for many weary days and nights; and Frederica had to hurry out, that she might give way in solitude to the rush of happy tears that welled up from her heart.

Nearly five months had passed since Frederica gave that promise to her uncle that she would try to look upon Mr. Duplessis with more favourable eyes, and grant him an opportunity of pleading his cause in person. It was a promise that was repented of as soon as made; and, as we have already seen, the Canadian derived so slight an advantage from the permission accorded him, that he was fain to pass it by altogether as though it had never been given, and await the quiet processes of time, which, when assisted by his own skilful by-play, might work some change in his favour,

rather than frighten his beautiful quarry by a bold rush, and so lose her at once and for ever. He had consented to play a patient game, in the full expectation of ultimately winning it. So accustomed had he been to winning such delicate hazards, sometimes almost without an effort, that, for a long time, no possibility of failure was suffered to cloud his mind. But at length it began to dawn dimly on him—and it was a thought that touched him to the quick with a sort of savage soreness—that he had been struggling all this time against a barrier of ice, before whose clear coldness all his petty wiles and stratagems, and little love-making arts, withered like exotics before the breath of winter. Admiration for his many brilliant qualities, Frederica might and did feel. She was young, and had a considerable fund of enthusiasm to draw upon; and she could not help liking this man who shone out so superior to the ordinary ruck of visitors at Belair. Then, again, he had a large claim on her gratitude, from the fact of having risked his own life to save that of her uncle. It was a deed that invested him in her eyes with a sort of heroic halo, through which many more faults than he allowed to be visible on the surface would have paled and grown dim. But, granting Duplessis all these points in his favour, and no one was more capable than he of making the most of them, the great indisputable fact still remained, that he found himself utterly unable to advance in her good graces beyond that coign of vantage to which he had so patiently worked his way, but which he had all along merely looked upon in the light of a stepping-stone to something higher. Let him venture but a step beyond it—and now and then he did so venture, treading delicately and with caution—and straightway the barrier of ice rose up before him, and he fell back to his old position, chilled and cowed, he hardly knew how or why, and with a bitter sense of humiliation and defeat working within him.

Yes, five months had come and gone since that bright summer afternoon on which Sir Philip Spencelaugh told him of the promise which he had wrung from his niece,

and the game seemed still as far from being won as ever. His patience was worn out at last ; he was growing desperate ; something must be done, and that immediately, for the demon of impecuniosity was knocking loudly at his door. He would make one last bold effort, assisted by the baronet, to win his beautiful prize ; and then—why, then, if he were unsuccessful, he would let her go, and trouble himself no further about the grapes he could not reach. There were other grapes, not bad fruit by any means, as such things go, within his reach for the plucking. Would it not be wiser in him quietly to accept this other fruit, and make the best of it, rather than waste further precious time on what was so evidently unattainable ? There was Lady Wintermere, for instance, just home from the German Spas ; a widow well dowered, and still, at forty years of age, passably handsome ; who looked with favourable eyes on the handsome Canadian, and was by no means indisposed to encourage his attentions. As the husband of her ladyship, even though her jointure should be tied up beyond his reach, and as the master of Oakthorpe Grange, he would at once take a certain position in society ; and it would be his own fault if he did not so *ménager* that all rents and revenues should percolate through his fingers, and leave some grains of precious dust by the way. In any case, for such as he, the lot was by no means an unenviable one. But to give up for ever his sweet Frederica ! — not forgetting all that she was heiress to—there was the pang. He really loved Miss Spencelaugh,—as much as it lay in his nature to love any one other than himself ; but he could not afford to waste more time in a fruitless love-chase. One last bold effort ; and then, should he fail—Lady Wintermere and Oakthorpe Grange.

Late, one dull wintry afternoon, Sir Philip Spencelaugh sat propped up in bed, turning over with heedless fingers the leaves of a large-print copy of Massillon, bound in old calf, which lay on the coverlet before him. A shaded lamp stood on a small table close by his bed, and Croke, his old and faithful body-servant, was mov-

ing noiselessly about the ante-room, within call. The old man's face was wan and pinched; but his eyes were brighter, and beamed with a fuller intelligence, Frederica thought, than she had seen in them for many months. At length the baronet spoke. "Crooke, go and inquire whether Mr. Duplessis is in the house. If he is, I should like to see him." Then when Crooke had gone, he went on, talking to himself: "No time to lose. I'll have it settled at once—at once. If she doesn't love him now, she will learn to do so after marriage. Girls like her don't know their own minds for a week together. No time to lose. It must be settled at once."

Mr. Duplessis was ushered into the room. After the usual greetings and inquiries were over, the old man motioned to the Canadian to seat himself on a chair close by the bed. Sir Philip lay back on his pillows for a minute or two with closed eyes before he spoke. "Henri, my friend," he said at last, "I want to know how your suit with Frederica prospers. Is the wedding-day fixed yet?"

When Duplessis entered the room, it was with the full intention of stating his case to Sir Philip, but the baronet's question took from him the necessity of doing so. "Miss Spencelaugh and I," he replied, "hold precisely the same position with regard to each other that we did six months ago."

"How is that?" asked Sir Philip, anxiously. "Are your views or wishes changed in any way?"

"Not in the slightest degree," replied Duplessis. "To win the hand of Miss Spencelaugh is still the dearest hope of my life."

"Then why haven't you won it? She gave you a chance, didn't she, months ago? Why did you neglect to take advantage of it?"

"The affection your niece has for you, Sir Philip, made her yield the point in opposition to her own wishes on the subject."

"Pooh, man! That's more than you know. Don't you pretend to read the riddle of a young girl's heart:

it lies beyond either your skill or mine to do so. But when once the point was conceded in your favour, why didn't you make the most of it?"

"I did make the most of it, in one sense. I pressed my suit quietly and unobtrusively. I did my best to work my way into the good graces of Miss Spencelaugh, and I failed. I still love her as dearly as ever I did, but I am afraid that she will never look upon me as anything more than a friend."

"Tut, man! you are far too timid a wooer. No wench's heart that isn't given away beforehand can stand against a bold, resolute lover. They are soft timorous things at the best of times, but as sly as the very deuce. If I had stood in your shoes, my boy, I would have forced Freddy into loving me—yes, sir, forced her!"

"Miss Spencelaugh is not a simple boarding-school miss, to be won by a few honeyed phrases, and empty protestations of affection."

"She is the best girl in the world, sir, though it is I who say it!" exclaimed the baronet warmly.—"And do you mean to tell me, Henri, that the minx isn't fond of you?"

"I am afraid, Sir Philip, that such is really the case," replied the Canadian, in a low, regretful voice.

"I tell you again, my dear boy, that you have gone too timidly about your courting. Freddy must like you in her secret heart, even though she won't acknowledge as much. I set my heart on this match long ago, and I don't think I could die happy unless it were to come off. I'll see Freddy about it myself; I'll see her at once. There's not much that she would refuse her old uncle."

The Canadian's eyes glittered, but he answered the baronet in a low earnest voice: "Not for worlds, my dear Sir Philip, would I have Miss Spencelaugh's inclinations forced in the slightest degree in my favour."

"No one wants to force her inclinations, sir. But I say again, there are not many things she would refuse her old uncle. Pour me out a little of that cordial, and

then tell Crooke to ask Miss Spencelaugh to come to me."

"But, my dear sir, you would not——"

"Not a word, Duplessis! I tell you I will have my own way in this matter, so don't try to turn me from it."

"But you surely don't wish me to remain in the room during your interview with Miss Spencelaugh?" persisted Duplessis.

"You shall remain in the room, but out of sight. Freddy shall not know that you are so near; you shall hide behind that screen. Nay, I will have it so. No remonstrances, or, by Heaven! I will never speak to you again.—Never saw Farren in 'The School for Scandal'—did you? No, I thought not. Then you missed a treat—you missed a treat. His screen-scene was the sublime of comedy.—But away with you, out of sight; I hear Freddy's voice as she talks to Crooke."

The Canadian vanished; and next moment Frederica entered the room, and hastening up to the bed, flung her arms round the old man's neck, and kissed him fondly. "You are better to-day, dear," she said; "I can see it in your face without your telling me."

"Better—yes. The sight of you always makes me better. But, Freddy, I want to talk to you on a serious matter. I want to know how it is that you and Duplessis——"

"We will wait till you are quite well, dear uncle, before we talk about that," said Frederica, hastily.

"Not so, darling; there's no time like the present time. I have been thinking much on this matter while I have been lying here. I'm anxious about it. You don't know how deeply my heart is set on this thing. Five months ago, you promised that you would try to like my friend a little—that you would try to look more favourably on his suit. Has the task been too hard a one for you, darling?"

"I do like Mr Duplessis—as a friend."

"But you do not love him?"

"No," said Frederica faintly.



"Pardon your old uncle the question, Freddy : but no one else has stolen your heart away without my knowing it?"

Frederica did not answer, but a slight motion of her head implied dissent.

"And yet you do not love Duplessis?" resumed the baronet. "Then my most cherished scheme falls to the ground, and my last earthly wish will never be realised. I cannot tell you, darling, how I have longed for this match to be brought about. But there—there! It cannot be, I suppose, and I will urge you no further."

"Why wish me to marry at all, dear uncle? My greatest happiness is to think that I shall always stay with you—always be as a daughter to you. I wish for nothing beyond this."

"But I shall not always be here, Freddy. Not many more days are left me in this world; on that point I am not deceived. But go now—I cannot say more; I care not how soon the end comes." All the light and life seemed to fade out of his face as he sank back on the pillows; the hollows deepened under his eyes, and his thin lips were contracted as with a spasm of intense pain. Frederica looked on in sore distress, all her woman's nature at war within her.

"But, dear uncle, Mr. Duplessis himself——"

"Is here to answer for himself," said the Canadian, as he stepped from behind the screen. "Pardon me, Sir Philip, but I could play the eavesdropper no longer."

"Listening, sir!" said Frederica, with a flash of scorn from her beautiful eyes.

"All my fault, Freddy—all my fault," said the baronet. "I made him go there, against his own wishes. I questioned him, and he told me you did not care for him, and I—I thought he was wrong, and I told him to go behind the screen, and hear for himself."

"A most unfair advantage to take of any one," said Frederica coldly.

"Ay, ay, perhaps so. I see it now," said the old man wearily. "I was foolish enough to hope—but it matters not now what I hoped. It is all over—all over."

The baronet ceased speaking, and no one answered him. There was silence in the room. The sick man lay with shut eyes and white, drawn face. Frederica stood close by the bed, her slender figure stretched to its full height, with rigid arms and intertwined fingers, and a marble fixity of features that made her seem for the moment like a piece of exquisite sculpture. Presently, her eyes wandered from the bed to where Duplessis was leaning in an attitude of dejection, with one elbow resting on the chimney-piece. Their eyes met. In those of Duplessis there was a soft, loving, wistful look—such a look as but very few eyes can express, and rarely those of a man; and it pierced through all Frederica's armour straight to her heart. He came a step or two nearer, and resting his arms on a high-backed chair of black oak, he gazed fixedly at her with that same yearning, inexplicable look in his eyes.

"I am here in a very false position this evening, Miss Spencelaugh," he said; "but I freely trust to your kindness to overlook the fact, and to listen to the few words I have to say, for the first time and the last, on a subject that has been very near to my heart for a long time. I have been silent hitherto, and I should have remained silent had not Sir Philip broken the ice; but as the case now stands, I must—for after what has passed I can no longer remain dumb—try to fashion into words some little of what I feel. I have loved you long and truly—loved you from the first day I saw you"—and with that Duplessis told briefly, in warm, impassioned accents, the story of his love. "But the wild, mad dream I was foolish enough to cherish is all over now," he ended by saying; "and from this night, Miss Spencelaugh, I shall haunt your presence no more. In a few days, I shall leave Monkshire for ever."

It was certainly a very finished piece of acting. He spoke in a minor key, slowly and almost solemnly, and there was a tender pathos in his voice which assisted his eyes wonderfully. Frederica felt herself strangely moved. The firm ground on which she had planted herself seemed to be slipping imperceptibly from under

her feet. That voice, those eyes; surely truth and love—— She felt herself sliding down towards some terrible abyss, from which only by a last desperate effort was there any chance of escape. She was roused by an exclamation from Duplessis, and her eyes followed his to the bed. A fearful change had come over the sick man. He was sitting upright in bed, his fingers clutching convulsively at the counterpane, and his eyes staring straight before him, while a cold clammy sweat bedewed his forehead. Frederica's arm was round him in an instant. His head came slowly round till his eyes met hers. There was something terrible in the intensity of their gaze. Inaudible words formed themselves on his lips. "He is dying!" cried Frederica in a tone of anguish. "Ring for help."

Again his lips formed themselves to speak, and this time a faint murmur fell on Frederica's ear. She bent her head to listen. "You will marry him, dear, will you not?" muttered the old man faintly, with that same terribly earnest look in his eyes.

Frederica's heart seemed to die within her. "Yes—I will marry him," she said in a low, clear voice, that was strangely unlike her own. Duplessis, with his hand on the bell-rope, heard the words and turned, while a sudden gleam of triumph shot across his face; and next instant the warning summons rang through the house. An almost inaudible "God bless you!" shaped itself on the old man's lips, and then the light suddenly left his eyes, and he fell back insensible on the pillows. Frederica's power of endurance was at an end. She turned from the bed. Duplessis saw the change in her face, and sprang to help her; but before he could reach her, she sank to the ground with a low cry, and remembered nothing more.

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## CHAPTER XXII.

### WHO WROTE THE LETTERS?

THE country clocks were just striking midnight as Mr. Duplessis walked up the pathway of his little garden,

and paused for a moment before going indoors to listen to the faint musical chimes borne through the silence from some near-at-hand church; and to glance for the second time at certain moonlight effects of cunningly interwoven light and shade among the trunks and crooked branches of the gnarled old trees that skirted his little demesne. For Mr Duplessis flattered himself that he had the soul of an artist for such trifles. He had walked home from Belair through the frosty moonlight, with no company save his cigar and his own thoughts—had walked home alone and of choice, that he might be enabled, calmly and without interruption, to think over all that had happened to him on that eventful evening. He had triumphed at last; his long waiting had met with the reward he coveted most; Frederica Spencelaugh had promised to become his wife. True, the promise had not been given by her as he would have liked it to be given; it had been dragged from her by main force, as it were; but he flattered himself that when once she became his own, she would speedily learn to be as loving and docile as any lord and master need desire. So there was triumph at his heart, and a bright smile of triumph on his handsome face, as he walked home along the lonely country roads, alternately smoking, and humming scraps from Béranger.

Mr. Duplessis let himself into the house by means of his latch-key, and went forward into the sitting-room, which was dimly lighted by a few embers in the grate. He was quickly followed by his housekeeper, sleepy and half-dazed, carrying a couple of lighted candles.

"You need not have sat up for me, Benson," he said; "I could have managed very well if you had left matches and a candle in the hall."—Antoine was away for a brief holiday, having gone to visit a brother who had just opened a café in London, otherwise Benson would have been in bed two hours ago.

"Who brought this letter, and when did it come?" asked Mr. Duplessis suddenly, as he took up a singular-looking document from the table.

"Letter, sir! What letter?" said the housekeeper,

"I never put any letter on the table, and not a soul has called here since you went out this evening."

"Then how the deuce did the letter get here? It was certainly not on the table when I went out."

Mrs. Benson was quite unable to say how the letter had got there. She did not like to contradict her master, but she felt sure he must have put it there himself before going out, and have forgotten it.

Mr. Duplessis, with the unopened letter in his hand, walked quickly across the room to the French window opposite the fireplace which gave access to the lawn. He opened it with a turn of the handle, and it could have been just as readily opened from the outside. "This window ought certainly to be bolted at dusk," he said rather sharply. "As it is, thieves and vagabonds of every kind can come and go as easily as I can myself."

Mrs. Benson folded her arms meekly over her chest, but said never a word in reply: she felt the reproof to be a just one.

Mr. Duplessis went back to the fire, and sinking into an easy-chair, placed his glass in his eye, and proceeded to examine the letter with a sort of half-contemptuous curiosity. The paper was coarse and dingy, and the direction was in a peculiar crabbed hand, which afforded no clue to the sex of the writer. It was folded in the old-fashioned style, without an envelope. "And it is actually fastened with a wafer!" muttered Mr. Duplessis to himself. "Some begging-letter, I suppose, from a widow with sixteen young children; or from a poor but unfortunate tradesman, requesting the loan of a small sum to set him up in business again, to be paid back with interest at doomsday. Bah! I'm sick of such appeals;" and with a fillip of his thumb and finger, he burst open the letter.

Benson had been fidgeting about—bolting the shutters, and placing the candles nearer her master, and raking the few dying embers together. She was just turning to leave the room, when Mr. Duplessis leaped from his chair with a wild, inarticulate cry, as though

he had been shot, and then stood with one hand pressed to his head, staring at the open letter with a face as colourless as that of the marble Aphrodite on the cabinet close by.

"Are you ill, sir? Can I do anything for you?" cried the terrified housekeeper, advancing a step or two.

His lips moved in reply, but no sound came from them; but she understood from the motion of his arm that he wished to be alone. So she went out trembling, and closed the door softly behind her; but went no further than the other end of the passage, and then stood listening for whatever might happen next. In a few minutes the bell rang. She went in timidly.

Mr. Duplessis was seated in his easy-chair again; the colour had in some measure come back to his face, but he looked twenty years older than he had done only a few minutes before. "This letter brings me very bad news, Benson," he said, speaking in a low, forced voice, and without looking his housekeeper in the face. "It tells me that my only brother is dead."

"Indeed, sir!" I am very sorry to hear that," said Benson, in a voice of deep concern, remembering, however, at the same time, that she had never heard Mr. Duplessis make mention of such a relative.

"So am I, Benson—very sorry indeed. There are certain business matters connected with this sad event which render it imperatively necessary that I should start for town by the first train. You will look after the lodge till Antoine returns; and should there be any inquiries for me, you may mention the mournful circumstance which has thus suddenly called me away, and say that I shall be back by Wednesday next at the latest. I find that a mail-train passes the nearest station at two o'clock, so that I have no time to lose. You will light the candles in my dressing-room at once, and then make me a cup of strong coffee; you may as well also put me up a sandwich or two as quickly as you can."

"Shall you want the horse got out, sir, to take you to the station?"

"No ; I shall have nothing to carry but my small travelling-bag ; and the walk this fine night will refresh me."

Half an hour later, Mr. Duplessis bade his housekeeper a kindly farewell, and quitted Lilac Lodge, carrying his bag in his hand, and took the road leading to the nearest railway station ; while Benson, sorely troubled and perplexed in her mind, fastened up the house, and went to bed.

In the dusk of the afternoon of the day following the departure of Mr. Duplessis, Mrs. Benson, having given the housemaid a holiday, sat leisurely enjoying her tea, the sole inmate of Lilac Lodge, when she was startled by a loud single knock at the frontdoor. On proceeding to open it, she found there two plainly-dressed men—certainly not gentlemen, probably two pettifogging tradesmen who had called about a bill, she said to herself—one of whom inquired whether Mr. Duplessis were at home.

"No, he aint at home," said the house-keeper irately, for she was vexed at being disturbed over her first cup ; "and what's more, he won't be at home for another week. His brother is dead, and he had to set off by the mail for London last night. There !" And she would have shut the door in the faces of the men, had not a foot been quietly interposed to prevent her.

"Then, if the governor's not here," said one of the strangers, "you will perhaps have no objections to show us over the house."

"Me show you over the house !" began Benson ; when one of the men, bending forward, whispered a few words in her ear, on which she fell back with a scared face, and allowed them to enter ; and having shut the door behind them, she went back to her tea in the kitchen. But her appetite was gone, and she sat listening and trembling, while the two strangers went about their perquisition up-stairs and down.

"Rummy start, aint it ?" said one of the men to the other, as they came for the second time into the sitting-room, having discovered no trace of Mr. Duplessis.

" I wonder whether somebody has given him the office, and he has hooked it, or whether this story about his brother being dead is true ? "

" The woman says he went last night, and we heard nothing about the affair till this morning. How was he to suppose we should find it out to-day ? "

" By jingo ! What's this ? " exclaimed the other man, whose sharp eyes had caught sight of a partially-burned paper in the grate ; and next moment he was unfolding it, and smoothing it out with careful, dexterous fingers.

The paper was strong and coarse, and had been squeezed up so tightly that the flames had merely burned away the loose edges, leaving the contents nearly intact. Throwing on to the letter the concentrated light of his bull's-eye, the second man peered over his friend's shoulder, and the two read as follows :—

" The dark secret which you thought you had hidden for ever, has come to light. To-morrow morning the police will be on your track. One who has been a blind instrument in the discovery of a fearful crime—one who would not willingly have your blood lie at his door—warns you. Flee while there is yet time. To-morrow it will be too late."

Some other word had been written where the word *his* stood in the letter, and afterwards carefully erased.

" The bird has flown, and the game's up for the present," said one of the men, when the document had been spelled carefully through.

" It was this bit of paper that started him," said the other. " The story about his brother is all gag. But don't it strike you as strange that the note I hold in my hand, and the one received by our superintendent this morning, are both in the same handwriting ? There can't be any doubt about it ; it's too remarkable a fist to be easily imitated. Rum, aint it ?—Now, you had better stop here a bit while I go up to the station, and hand in this note, and get fresh instructions ; and I'll send down another man to relieve you as soon as possible."

The case was as the two men had stated it. By the



early post that morning, the Normanford superintendent of police had received an anonymous letter conveying certain information, the accuracy of which he felt himself bound at once to investigate. He put his men upon the track pointed out in the letter. Abel Garrod and his wife were the first persons questioned. They gave evidence as to the meeting of Mr. Duplessis and the woman Marie; to the intimate relations apparently existing between the two; to the stay of the latter under Abel Garrod's roof for three days; and finally, to their departure together. Simultaneously with this inquiry, another was going forward at the "Silver Lion" at Fairwood. Here the police gathered a piece of confirmatory evidence not mentioned in the letter, in the production, by the landlady, of a handkerchief marked with blood, and bearing the name of the missing woman, found under the seat of the gig the day after it had been hired by Mr. Duplessis. The old collector at the toll-bar also underwent a strict examination. Then the two parties of police met, by previous appointment, at Martell's Leap, the neighbourhood of which spot their anonymous informant had directed them to search minutely, especially the beach immediately below, and the crevices and recesses in the face of the cliff.

Leaving his men still occupied with the search, the superintendent himself rode over to Sir Harry Craxford, the nearest magistrate; and on the strength of the evidence which he laid before him, obtained a warrant for the arrest of Henri Duplessis, which was at once placed in the hands of two efficient officers, but with what result we have already seen. The search for the missing woman, unavailing on the first day, was resumed with renewed energy the following morning, but without further result than the discovery, on a ledge of rock about twenty feet above the beach, of a broken jet bracelet, which was at once identified by Jane Garrod as similar to one worn by Madame. This discovery went a long way towards confirming the general opinion that the missing woman had been thrown over the cliff; and as it was found to have been high water at 4 P.M.

on the day of her disappearance, there was little doubt that, in such a case, her body had been washed away by the tide.

Of Duplessis himself, no tidings could be learned, neither on the railway nor elsewhere. Country constables and metropolitan detectives alike failed in their efforts to trace him. A minute description of his personal appearance was inserted in the *Police Gazette*, and there read by thousands of keen eyes, all thenceforth eagerly on the watch, in seaport town and country village, to single out a quarry which promised so much sport to his captors. But from the moment when the housekeeper, looking out after him into the moonlight, saw him disappear behind the screen of laurels which shut in the lawn, he seemed as utterly lost to human ken as though the earth had opened at his feet, and swallowed him up for ever. Of Antoine the imperturbable, when he returned home, which he did on the day following that of his master's departure, policedom could make nothing. The quiet insolence of his replies, when he was examined before Sir Harry Craxford, threw that worthy but irascible personage into such a violent rage as threatened at one time to bring on a fit of apoplexy. But as it could not be shown that the valet was in any way mixed up with the affair which attached such dark suspicion to Duplessis, the magistrate was obliged to order him to be set at liberty; and the next night Antoine disappeared as mysteriously as his master had done, and was seen no more at Lilac Lodge.

The mind, however, of Mr. Davis, the superintendent, still remained restless and ill at ease. That the two anonymous letters—the one addressed to himself, and the other addressed to Duplessis—had been written by the same person, was a fact scarcely open to dispute, when they came to be compared together. But who was the writer of them? This was a question which the superintendent found himself utterly unable to answer. All his cautious underhand inquiries could elicit no information on the point; and he was fain, after a

time, to give the matter up, and class it among the other unravelled puzzles of his profession.

At Belair, the news of Mr. Duplessis' sudden departure, and of the strange charge afterwards alleged against him, was received at first as something too incredible for belief. The man had been there so often, and was so intimately known, that the inmates of the Hall could hardly help feeling for a time as if some shadow of disgrace attached to themselves. Lady Spencelaugh was sorry in her way, for Mr. Duplessis had been one of her few favourites; but it was a sorrow that was very short-lived, and soon gave way to indignation at the thought that "so vile a creature," as she now termed the Canadian, had succeeded for so long a time in imposing on so important a personage as her Ladyship. By Frederica, the news was received with strangely mingled feelings, which she herself would have been powerless to analyse. In the first shock of her surprise and disbelief, she felt more warmly towards the Canadian than she had ever done before. Had she not promised to become his wife? and now that this horrible cloud of disgrace and misery was lowering over him, was not her proper place by his side? Yes; but how could she be by his side?—how comfort him by written or spoken word, now that he was gone no one knew whither? And when day passed after day, and still he came not to disprove the black charges brought against him; and when Frederica read in the local newspaper the fearful list of proofs which the exertions of the police had gathered up, one after another, her conviction of his innocence began to give place to doubt; and with this doubt came a rush of fearful joy, which she found it vain to try to stifle, at the thought, that if Duplessis were never to return, then she, Frederica Spencelaugh, would be once more a free woman. How warmly the thought nestled round her heart! It was like a hidden singing-bird that would not be chased away, or chidden into silence, but still sang sweetly on within some inmost bower.

The news of the charge against his friend Duplessis

was sedulously kept from the ears of Sir Philip Spence-laugh. In the then feeble state of his health, such a shock might have proved fatal to the old man. It was intimated to him that the Canadian had been called away on private business of importance, which was likely to detain him for some time; and although he often wondered, in a feeble-minded way, why Duplessis neither came nor wrote, his memory was so far weakened that he often forgot the absence of his friend, and talked of him as though he were engaged to dine at Belair on the morrow.

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## CHAPTER XXIII.

## JERRY'S NEW TOY.

As the reader will have already surmised, the rescuer of John English was none other than the chemist's sister. John had not unfrequently left his lodgings for two or three days at a time without giving Mrs. Jake-way any previous intimation of his intentions; and in the present instance, that worthy soul was entirely unsuspecting that any mishap had befallen the young photographer. Hannah was the first to take the alarm. Her brother had left home with the avowed intention of being away for a week at the least; but late on the fourth night after his departure, Hannah was surprised by his unexpected return; and her suspicions that he had some black business in hand were first aroused by the injunction which he laid upon her, not to speak of his return to anyone, as his stay would only extend over a couple of hours, after which he would again take his departure as quietly as he had come. Presently, Hannah was startled by a peculiar scratching outside the window; but Brackenridge seemed to understand what it meant, and going to the door, admitted Jerry Winch; and Hannah was at once ordered off to bed. Hannah kissed her brother, and went up-stairs, but only to steal down again five minutes later, with attenuated skirts, and without her shoes. The voices inside the sitting-room sounded low and muffled through the closed door,

and the listening woman could only make out a word now and then; but what she did hear was sufficient to send her back up-stairs with a scared face, when the noise of chairs being moved inside the room warned her that it was time to go.

Early next forenoon, without saying a word to anyone, Hannah Brackenridge set out for the little sea-side village of Merton, which lies about two miles north of Finger Bay. Hannah had some friends here in the persons of an old farmer and his wife, whom she was in the habit of visiting two or three times each year; and here also lived an old admirer of hers, Mark Purvis by name, whose love she had cruelly slighted. But Mark's memory still dwelt kindly on the pale-faced Hannah, a fact which was well known to her; and it was to Mark that she now looked for assistance in carrying out her scheme. On reaching Merton, she found that Mark had gone out for the day, and would not be home till a late hour; but whatever the hour might be, she must wait and see him. She left the old farmer and his wife, who knew nothing of her real errand, at her usual hour for returning home. Then walking out for a couple of miles along the road by which she knew that Mark must reach Merton, she waited at a little tavern, hour after hour, listening for the sound of his horse's hoofs. It was past ten o'clock before he came; and in half an hour from that time Hannah was rowing across to Inch-mallow in her lover's boat. She had resolutely refused either to let Mark accompany her, or to tell him whither she was going; only, he was to meet her at a certain time, at a certain spot, and take the boat back to Merton. How she succeeded in rescuing John English from the fate which at one time seemed so imminent, we have already seen.

John hired a chaise, and reached home the following afternoon, frightening Mrs. Jakeway exceedingly with the sight of his worn white face. He kept his promise to his mysterious preserver; and was impervious to all Mrs. Jakeway's hints and half-questions as to where he had been, and what had happened to him, to change him so

wofully in so short a time. All he could be induced to say was, that he had been taken suddenly ill during the time he was away, but that he was better now. Naturally enough, he was greatly perplexed in his own mind as to the identity of his rescuer: that he owed his life to the chemist's sister was a fact of which he had not the remotest suspicion.

Brackenridge coming home at the end of eight days from his first departure, and being informed by his sister that Mr. English had been severely ill, without waiting to take off his travelling things, hurried at once into Cliff Cottage to offer his condolences. He was surprised—he was astounded—he didn't know whether he was standing on his head or his heels, when John told him what had befallen himself at Inchmallow. The whole thing was almost too incredible for belief, said the chemist. Jerry Winch had been employed for years to take parties to the island, and had been a favourite with everybody. What had put the idea into his foolish head to play off such a dangerous trick on Mr. English, was utterly beyond his, Brackenridge's, power, even faintly to imagine. But one thing he would take care of: that Jerry should never in future be allowed to officiate as guide to the island. But what did Mr. English intend to do in the matter? Did he intend to institute proceedings against the simpleton?—No? Well, that was noble, that was generous; and he must be allowed to say that it was wise also. Jerry's friends must be careful that no similar responsibility should ever be allowed to rest on him in future. But how did Mr. English succeed in escaping from the island? That was a point which he, Brackenridge, was much interested in ascertaining.

But John, bearing in mind the promise he had given, positively declined to enlighten the chemist on that point; and Brackenridge was obliged to return home with his curiosity unsatisfied. He was gloomy and pre-occupied all the evening; and about eleven o'clock he set out for the "Hand and Dagger," entering it by a back way which he made use of when he did not wish to be

seen by the ordinary customers of the hotel; and Mrs. Winch and he had a long interview together in the private room of the landlady. The method of John English's escape from the island lay heavily on the minds of both of them: it was unknown, and must therefore, they felt, be to some extent dangerous to their peculiar interests. The chemist's diabolical plan had miscarried, though how or why, neither the landlady nor her companion could so much as guess. The promised three hundred pounds were still as far as ever from the fingers that itched to clutch them; and the widow was still as determined as ever that her wedding-day should be postponed till the obstacle which stood so persistently in the path of Lady Spenceclough and herself should be finally disposed off. Once more Brackenridge exerted all his persuasive powers in an effort to induce the widow to reveal to him the nature of the secret which bound her so firmly to the interests of the mistress of Belair; and once more all his cajoleries proved in vain, and he had to return home, baffled and enraged, and only withheld from throwing up the whole business by the golden lure which shone so temptingly before his mind's eye.

Jerry Winch had been missing from his usual haunts for several days, and many people wondered what had become of the obliging simpleton. But Jerry was in hiding, and no one in the little town, save his mother and Brackenridge, knew the place of his retreat, which was at a little farmhouse about a dozen miles from Normanford, inhabited by a cousin of Mrs. Winch. On the forenoon of the day following that of his interview with the landlady, Brackenridge borrowed a horse and gig belonging to one of his friends, and set off to see Jerry. The lad was out, a servant told him, when he reached the house, adding that Jerry would most likely be found at the clearing in the fir plantation. And there Brackenridge did find him, stealing on him unawares, and watching him in silence for several minutes before making his presence known. Jerry was singularly employed. At one end of a small clearing in the gloomy

plantation, he had fixed up two forked sticks about five feet in height, with a third stick fastened across them. To this cross-bar a piece of string was knotted, the other end of which was firmly tied to the leg of a miserable sparrow. Jerry, standing a few paces away, with a loaded pistol in his hand, waited till the bird, tired with its ineffectual efforts to escape, perched on the cross-bar, and the moment it did so, he took aim and fired. If unsuccessful in hitting it, he waited patiently till the fluttering creature perched once more, and then fired again; and so kept on, till he either succeeded in killing the sparrow, or else cutting the string with his bullet, and so allowed it to escape. On a branch close by hung a wicker cage containing a dozen or more sparrows, all destined for a similar fate. As often as Jerry succeeded in killing a bird, he burst into a wild fit of laughter, that bent him double, and shook him violently, as though he were being clutched at by invisible demoniac fingers.

"He seems made on purpose to do the Fiend's own bidding," muttered Brackenridge to himself, as he stepped into the opening. "Well, Jerry, my man," he said aloud, "how are you to-day? That's a pretty plaything you have got there," pointing to the pistol.

"Yes," said the lad, with a grave nod of the head; "it's Jerry's new toy. Rare fun to shoot sparrows! Poor beggars! how they try to get away, don't they?"

"But how came you to obtain such a toy?"

"It was in Milcham's window for sale for a long time, and Jerry never saw it without longing to have it. So he saved up all his shillings and sixpences till he had got enough money to buy it, and then he gave old drunken Steve Benson a shilling to go and get it for him. Hoo, hoo, hoo! Rare fun to shoot sparrows! Watch and see how nicely Jerry can knock one off its perch."

"Not now, thank you, Jerry—some day when I have more time. I want to talk to you about something else to-day. By the bye, how is Pipanta?"

"Alas! the lovely Pipanta is dead," said Jerry in a tone of anguish, as his arms fell dejectedly by his side, and the tears came into his large blue eyes.



"Dead!" exclaimed the chemist in a sympathetic voice. "When did she die?"

"This day week," said the lad, sadly. "And Jerry buried her at midnight, when the moon was at full, under the Witches' Oak on Pensdale Moor. Oh! my lovely Pipanta! Jerry has lost his darling for ever!"

"Died this day week, did she?" said Brackenridge, musingly. "Let me consider. Why, that was the very day that Katafango escaped from Inchmallow!"

"Escaped! Has the great magician escaped?" exclaimed the terrified Jerry. "Then he will kill poor Jerry, or perhaps cast a spell over him, and turn him into a snake or a toad. Put some of the white powder into his drink!"

The chemist smiled, and stroked the lad's hair. "Jerry has no cause to be afraid," he said; "the charm which his friend gave him will keep him safe against the arts of all the magicians in the world. No, my poor lad; Katafango can do no harm to you; but had he not escaped, Pipanta would not have died. Now he will take her soul, and put it into the body of a toad, and so imprison it for ever. And the turn of Mogaddo will come next."

"No, no," screamed the boy; "Mogaddo shall not die!" Then in an intense whisper, and with his lips close to the chemist's ear, he said: "Let Jerry kill Katafango!"

"Tut, tut! my dear boy, what are you talking about?" said the chemist, pleasantly. "But put that pretty toy into your pocket, and link your arm in mine, and let us walk together to the top of the hill, and consider what means we shall adopt to save the life of your pet, Mogaddo."

Two days later, the country carrier, returning home from Fairwood market in the dusk of the winter afternoon, found the bleeding and insensible body of a man lying in the road; and being a strong fellow, he contrived to lift it into his cart, and drove with it to the nearest house, which, as it happened, was that of the station-master of Kingsthorpe station. And so, without

any exercise of their own will in the matter, John English and Jane Garrod were at last brought face to face, and another link in the chain was complete.

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## CHAPTER XXIV.

### JOHN AND HIS NURSE.

JOHN ENGLISH lifted his languid eyelids, and gazed feebly around. He was in a strange room, and there was a strange face at his bedside—a strange face, but not an unkind one. “Where am I? and who are you?” he asked in a weak voice.

“You are in the house of Abel Garrod, the station-master at Kingsthorpe; and I am Abel Garrod’s wife.”

“How did I come here? and what has happened to me?”

“You are not to talk—the doctor has forbidden it. But I will answer your questions, just to satisfy your mind; and then you must try to go to sleep, and I will tell you everything when you are stronger. You were found on the road yesterday afternoon, about a mile from here, and brought to this house. You had been shot through the shoulder, and had lost a great deal of blood. The ball has been extracted; but the wound is a dangerous one, and you will be confined to your bed for some time to come. One question I should like you to answer me: Did you see the man who shot you, or have you any idea who he was?”

“Let me think,” said John. Then, after a pause: “I remember everything now. I had set off to go up to Belair with a portfolio of photographs; and had just left the meadows for the high-road, and was passing the clump of larches, when I heard a rustling behind me, and next moment a shot, and then I felt that I was hit. I turned, and saw the dusky outline of a figure hurrying stealthily through the brushwood, and made an attempt to pursue it. But in a moment or two, the ground seemed to reel under my feet, and then all was darkness. Why I was shot, or by whom I was shot, I know no more than you do.”

"Not another word," said Jane Garrod. "You have talked far more already than you have strength for."

"My portfolio—has it been found?" said John anxiously, without noticing Jane's injunction.

"It was picked up near you, and lies on that table."

"Then, pray oblige me by having it sent up to Miss Spencelaugh at Belair, with a message explaining that, in consequence of an accident, I am unable to take it myself."

"But you—it is not possible that you know Miss Spencelaugh!" said Jane with a strange look on her face.

"I certainly have the honour of being acquainted with Miss Spencelaugh," said John with a smile of almost womanly sweetness. "Does that fact seem very strange to you?" Then his eyes lighted suddenly, and he added: "You also know her; I can see it by your face. Tell me——" But his new-found strength seemed all at once to desert him, and with a little sigh, his head drooped on the pillow, and Jane saw that he had fainted.

Jane blamed herself severely for having thus allowed her patient to overtax his strength; and for the next two or three days she strictly enforced the most absolute silence. John tried several times to draw her into conversation, but Jane always refused to answer him, and left the room if he persisted in questioning her; so that he was fain, after a time, to wait, with what patience he might, till the doctor should give him leave to talk. His wound was an ugly one, and his recovery was proportionately slow and tedious. Still, there were many languid hours—hours when his wound ceased for a time to pain him—when it seemed very pleasant to lie there in that snug, cheerful little room, where everything was so exquisitely clean; to lie there between the lavender-scented sheets, and gaze through the window, across the snowy fields, to where a great hill shut in the prospect a mile or two away; with a nearer view of the spire of Kingsthorpe church standing clearly out above the tree-tops; and quite in the fore-ground, of the pointed roof and red twisted chimneys of Woodfield Grange. The

peace and quiet that brooded over everything harmonised well with his weakness of body and languor of mind. He was content to lie by for a little while in this quiet haven, and let the world, with all its cares and turmoil, roll unheeded away—content to lie there and think of Frederica. Lying thus, day after day, his eyes found many pleasant things to dwell upon. There was a bunch of snow-drops growing in a flower-pot against the window, every blossom of which was known to him. Then, outside the window, came robins and sparrows, and other birds, attracted thither by the crumbs scattered every day by Jane; which pecked at the casement with their tiny beaks when the crumbs were all gone, and peered curiously in at quiet John, as though they were anxious about the state of his health. Then, in the wintry afternoon, a squadron of marauding rooks would lazily wing their way homeward towards Woodfield Grange, under the leadership of some wary old bird, showing blackly out against the bright western sky; and would not finally settle into their nests till after much airy disputation among themselves, and many ceremonious leave-takings for the night between friends and neighbours. Then that bit of western sky, with the white, hushed landscape below it, framed by the diamond-paned casement, on frosty afternoons, when the sinking sun gleamed through the rising mists like a fiery eye, was of itself beautiful to look upon.

Coming back inside the room, John's eyes always lingered on the homely face of his kind nurse. How noiseless, how assiduous, how attentive to his slightest wish she was! What had he, a complete stranger to her, done to deserve such kindness? "How can I ever repay you?" John would sometimes feebly murmur, as his eyes followed her about the room.

"By doing as you are told," Jane would reply; "and by not talking till the doctor gives you leave."

Waking up suddenly one evening from a deep, refreshing sleep, John saw his nurse standing by his bedside, gazing into his face with strangely earnest eyes; and the same moment a sudden light broke on him.

Jane was the first to speak: "The doctor says that you may talk for five minutes to-day."

Without heeding her remark, John said: "You are the woman whom I saw one evening, a couple of months ago, in the waiting-room of the Kingsthorpe station. You, too, saw me, and seemed to recognize me, and the recognition startled you. I heard you mutter something about having 'come back from the dead,' and then you hurried away. Why did you act thus, and whom did you take me to be?"

Jane had pushed back the candle while he was speaking, so that her face was now in shadow, and John could not see its workings. After a moment's silence, as if to collect herself, she said: "Before I answer your question, you must allow me to ask you another. How did you come by that strange blue figure which is marked on the upper part of your left arm?"

"Do you mean the coiled snake with the lotus-flower in its mouth, which is tattooed on the part you mention?"

"The same."

"Oh, that has been there longer than I can remember; and, for anything I can tell to the contrary, may have been there when I was born."

"You will pardon me asking you the question, will you not," said Jane, "but is John English your real name?"

"For all practical purposes, it is," answered John. "And a good, useful name I've found it. But why these strange questions? Again I ask you—whom do you take me to be?"

"I cannot take you for any other than the gentleman you represent yourself to be," said Jane. "What strikes me in your appearance, and did the first time I saw you, is the extraordinary likeness you bear to some one whom I knew many, many years ago."

"Who was that person?" said John.

"Some day, I will tell you; at present, I cannot."

"But why did you ask me about the mark on my arm?" said John.

"That is another question which I do not feel at liberty to answer, till I know more of your history."

"More mysteries!" said John, wearily. Then he added, impulsively: "I like you. You are a good woman. I feel that I can trust you; and some day, when I shall be stronger, I will tell you the story of my life. For your great kindness to a poor, helpless wretch in his hour of extremity, I know that I can never sufficiently repay you."

"Time is up," said Jane, abruptly. "You must talk no more to-day."

"Tell me," said John, "did you send the portfolio up to Belair, as I requested?"

"I did; but Miss Spenceclough has been from home for a week past, and does not return home till this evening."

"Then you know Miss Spenceclough?" said John, eagerly. "I was sure you did."

"These arms nursed her when she was a helpless baby," said Jane, proudly. "It was I who brought her home from India, after her poor mamma's death; and I lived with her at Belair, tending her, and waiting on her, till my Lady persuaded Sir Philip to get a governess for her, and then I was wanted no more."

"Then there is one more tie between us than I thought of," said John; "for I too——" He stopped abruptly, and all the little blood that was left in his body seemed to mount into his face.

"My poor boy! do you think I am blind?" said Jane with a smile, as she stroked his hair softly. "I am going up to Belair in the morning, and I won't fail to tell Miss Frederica how it happened that you were not able to take up the portfolio yourself. But not another word now—not another word."

"And why should it not be?" said Jane to herself, as she stood with her apron thrown over her head, gazing out into the frosty twilight, waiting for her husband. "Why should they not come together, if he be——. But I dare not speak the name even to myself. And yet, things do sometimes happen in this dull world more

wonderful than one reads about in story-books. But I am deceiving myself; such a thing as this could never happen. And yet the likeness—the likeness!”

Jane Garrod went up to Belair the following morning, and had a long interview with Frederica; but what passed between the two in nowise concerns us at present. On the afternoon of the same day, a groom made his appearance at the station, with a present of grapes and hot-house flowers for Mr. English; and next morning, Frederica herself rode over, and halted at the door for two minutes. John English, from his little room, could hear her clear, silvery voice as she talked to Jane Garrod, and the impatient pawing of Zuleika.

From that time, fruit and flowers for the invalid were sent almost daily from Belair; and two or three times each week, Frederica herself might be seen at the little station-house. She never dismounted, and John never saw her, for the window of his room looked out in the opposite direction. But he could hear the music of her voice; and after she was gone, Jane Garrod always came upstairs, and told him as much of the conversation that had passed between herself and Frederica as it concerned him to hear. What happiness for him to think that it was sweet concern for his health that drew the mistress of his heart so often to that lowly roof! He never paused to ask himself whither his infatuation was leading him; for him the present was all in all. So that time of recovery from his hurt was for John English one of the pleasantest of his life; a happy, restful interregnum from all the turmoil and petty cares of every-day existence. His recovery was slow, but sure. It was tacitly understood between Jane Garrod and himself that he should tell her the story of his life as soon as his strength would allow of the exertion. Each felt that the other had something to reveal; each of them held, as it were, a fragment of a key. Would the two fragments, when welded together, prove strong enough to unlock the heart of the mystery?

At length the day came when the doctor gave John

permission to venture down stairs, and Jane made quite a little jubilee of the event. Abel Garrod left the house as soon as tea was over, to attend to his trains.

"Twilight is the best time for story-telling," said John, as he stretched his great length of limb along the little sofa in front of the fire; "and I could hardly have a better time than the present for telling mine. Will you kindly reach me that cigar case. Thanks. *Nous revenons toujours à nos premiers amours*; which means that, after an abstinence of six weeks, a Havanna is a very pleasant thing."

He lit his cigar, and fell back into his old lounging posture on the sofa, and then was silent a minute or two gathering up his thoughts.

It was nearly dark outside by this time. Far and near, the wintry landscape lay crisply white; but within the uncurtained room, the dancing fire-light gleamed fitfully. The shadows, playing a timorous game at hide-and-seek among themselves, stole coily out of the corners, hustling one over another, only to disappear, next moment, as the ruddy blaze rose and fell, bringing into momentary relief the great black beard and gaunt face of the young photographer, and the brooding, earnest features of his auditor; and anon leaving little else visible than the glowing tip of John's cigar. And thus it was that John told the story of his life.

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## CHAPTER XXV

### JOHN ENGLISH TELLS HIS STORY.

"Once upon a time," began John, "there was a young man who knew neither his name, nor his age, nor where he was born.—But I had better drop the story-telling style, and say what I have got to say in my own fashion.—My earliest recollections, which are very faint, and very vague, carry me back, as in a dream, to a stately and beautiful home, where everybody is kind to me. I seem to see myself, a very wee fellow indeed, richly dressed, cantering on a pony down a long avenue of trees; and then I am inside a magnificent room, and



a lady in rustling silk is beside me, who speaks to me in a soft, silvery voice. I fancy she is trying to persuade me to take some physic; but I don't like her in spite of her honeyed words. Then, all at once, I am in a dreadful room with barred windows, and great wooden, high-backed chairs, and a huge, funereal-looking bed, to which a faint odour of dead people seems to cling—a bed that becomes absolutely horrible as the afternoon deepens. Something whispers to me that behind that shroud-like drapery a skeleton is hidden, which will put forth its bony hand in the middle of the night, and clutch me by the hair; and the conviction at length works so powerfully upon me, that I rush to the door and shriek aloud to be let out. But nobody heeds me, and I fancy that I go off into some kind of a fit, and am ill for many days afterwards.

“Next I am on the sea, and still ill, but in a different way, and am waited upon, off and on, by a lame ugly man and his shrewish-looking wife, who call themselves my uncle and aunt. But I repudiate the relationship in a childish, obstinate way that makes the lame man snarl and growl, and threaten with an oath to fling me overboard. We seem to be a long time on that dreary sea; but we land at last on a bustling wharf, where I feel more insignificant and miserable than before. Next come scenes, like portions of a moving panorama, in a strange country as we move slowly forward to our new home, which is in a wretched little American country town. I will not inflict upon you any detail of the miserable life led by me during the next five or six years. The man with whom I lived, and whose name was Jeremiah Kreefe, was a surgeon by profession, and might no doubt have done well had he not been such a drunken dissolute fellow. Me, he ever seemed to hate, and his treatment of me corresponded with the intensity of his dislike. In his drunken fits he made a point of thrashing me ferociously, with or without provocation, till, after a time, I grew too wary for him, and kept out of his reach till he was sober again. But even that did not always save me. That I was headstrong and obstinate, and had a wilful

temper of my own, I do not doubt; but in any case I cannot think that I deserved such cruel treatment at his hands. I have a grateful recollection of his wife having saved me from his clutches on two or three occasions. Ordinarily, she was a coarse, sharp-tempered woman enough, with a hand that seemed ever ready to give me a sly box on the ears. After a time I was sent to school and there another cane was at work, beating knowledge into me perforce, and a very painful process I found it to be.

"The hatred of Jeremiah Kreefe seemed to deepen as I grew older; indeed, the feeling was a mutual one. Sometimes, when he was in his cups, and so far gone as to be incapable of pursuit, I would take my revenge by jeering at him, and calling him names, and setting him at defiance generally. He would snarl and foam at the mouth like a caged hyena, and fling anything at my head that came readiest to his hand; while I performed a sort of impish war-dance round him, and snapped my fingers contemptuously in his face. Had I gone within reach of his muscular arm at such a time, I feel sure that he would have killed me outright. What seemed to annoy him more than anything else when he was sober, was my stubborn refusal to address him as my 'uncle.' Nothing that he said or did could induce me to do this. I defied alike his threats and his promises. I did more than that—I told it up and down the little town that he was not my uncle; and when people asked me who my parents were, I said I didn't know, but that Dr. Kreefe knew, and they had better ask him. And I believe—but how I came to know it, I cannot tell—that the minister and one or two other gentlemen did ask him certain questions, which he found it rather difficult to answer; and I think it likely that the devilish scheme which his evil brain presently hatched resulted from his alarm at being thus cross-questioned.

"Early one bitterly cold morning—as nearly as I can tell, I was about nine years old at the time—Kreefe rode up to the door, mounted on a strong grey horse; and I was told that he was going a long journey, and that I was to accompany him. He seized me roughly

by the shoulder, swung me up behind him, and passing a strong strap round both our waists, told me to hold tight, if I didn't want to slip off and be smashed. Thus, at break of day, we rode together through the sleepy little town; and Kreefe's wife, standing in the doorway, looked after us with a white, frightened face. Once on the hard, rough, country roads, we rode more quickly—rode all through the short winter-day, stopping now and then for refreshments, or to bait our horse, and then forward again. As night came on, we left the last squatter's clearing behind us—as in a dream, I heard some one tell Kreefe this—and so came out on to a great rolling prairie, lighted up by the rays of the full moon. I had grown terribly weary long before this, and had fallen into a sort of half-sleep, without losing all consciousness of where I was, and was only saved from falling by the belt round my waist. A more angry jerk than usual roused me up occasionally, and it was at one of these times that I caught my first glimpse of the prairie. But I was too far gone to heed even that, and was soon lost in dreamland again. I have a sort of half-consciousness of hearing a number of strange voices, and of being lifted off the horse, and laid down on something soft near a huge fire; but I have no distinct recollection of anything more till I awoke some time the following morning, to find myself surrounded by strange faces, and to be told that I should never see my tyrant again.

And I never did see Kreefe again—a loss which did not grieve me. I found myself a member of a squatter's family that was moving westward, to occupy a choice tract of land which had been won by one of the sons in a raffle. The father, the chief of this strange brood, was a rude, rough-and-tumble old fellow; by no means bad-hearted, in his own peculiar way; who had lived all his life on the outskirts of civilisation, and who was equally ready for a tussle with a grisly bear or a skirmish with the Indians. The sons were true chips of the old block—free, rollicking young giants while they were among friends, but merciless and cruel as

death when their darker passions were roused. The mother was dead. Two unmarried daughters, and the wife of the eldest son, comprised the fairer portion of the family—rough, ignorant, kind-hearted, passionate souls, who did their best to spoil the parentless lad thrown so strangely among them. I think there can be no doubt that Kreefe bribed the old squatter to take me with him into the wilderness, and so lose sight of an eyesore and danger for ever, and weaken still further the last frail thread which bound me in memory to a former happy life beyond the sea. The surgeon's name was never mentioned among us. I was quite willing to forget him; and the squatter had probably his own reasons for silence on the matter.

“Among this wild brood I lived, in everything like one of themselves, till I was eighteen years old. I learned how to use the axe, and clear the forest; how to ride, shoot, swim, and hunt; how to track my way across wilderness and prairie by signs known only to the red man and the hunter; and I grew up as tall, as strong, and almost as much a savage as the young giants, my foster-brothers. I lived a contented, careless, day-to-day sort of life; happy in the present, and indifferent alike to the future and the past. Not that the past was forgotten, for my memory was tenacious, and carried with it many recollections of my earlier life; but I looked back upon that time with very languid interest, as though it had belonged to quite a different person from myself.

“In one respect, and in one only, was I treated in any way differently from the rest of the family. Twice every year, in the spring and the fall, the old man, accompanied by two of his three sons, all dressed in their gayest apparel, and riding their best horses, would set out for the nearest town, there to make certain indispensable household purchases; but I was never allowed to be of the party on such occasions. I think that if the old man had taken me with him only once, I should have come back quite contented; but he would not do so, and I determined to outwit him the first

opportunity. A chance offered itself at last. The old man was laid up with sickness, for the first time in his life, at the same time that the eldest son was confined to his house through an accident; and as the visit to the town could be no longer delayed, it was decided that the two youngest lads should go alone. Half an hour after their departure, I quietly saddled a horse, and started after them. I overtook them a few miles away, and we rode on gaily together, laughing to think how riled 'Dad' would be when he heard of my escapade.

"While wandering about the town, all eyes and ears, I accidentally heard that the commandant of a government exploring expedition, who had halted there for a day with his camp, was in want of a few good hunters to accompany him across the prairies. Here was an opening that suited well with my budding ambition, and thirst for a wider range of experience than would ever be mine while I stayed with the old squatter. I went, on the spur of the moment, and volunteered my services, and was at once accepted. I bade farewell to my foster-brothers, sent a kindly message to the old folk at home, and set out next morning with my new comrades, as blithe and bold as the best of them. Then followed two years of wild adventure, of which it is not needful that I should speak further at present; and then came a great change. One day, while wandering about at some distance from the camp in quest of game, I heard the growling of a bear. Parting the brushwood cautiously, I advanced in the direction of the sound. The growls became louder and more menacing, and a few yards brought me to a small opening among the trees, in the centre of which a man in a hunter's dress was endeavouring to keep a huge bear at bay with the stock of his rifle. Before I could interfere in any way, the monster, with a stroke of its paw, sent the rifle spinning through the air, and next moment rushed open-mouthed on its assailant. That minute was the last of its life.

"The stranger whom I had so providentially rescued, proved to be a wealthy English gentleman named Felix, who was travelling for pleasure, and from an innate love

of adventure. He had been visiting among some tribes of friendly Indians, and his little encampment was only a mile or two away. Mr. Felix was more than ordinarily grateful for the service I had done him. He took a great liking to me; and a few days later, he visited the commandant of the expedition, and, by means best known to himself, obtained my release, and carried me away with him. From that day till he died I never left him. The squatter's name was Yarnold, and I had been known as Jack Yarnold; but when Mr. Felix heard my history, he said: 'You are no Yankee, but a genuine son of the old country; and till we find out your real name, you shall be called John English.' And that is how I came by the name I still bear. Even after so long a time, I had not quite forgotten the scraps of knowledge which had been flogged into me when a lad at school. I could still read and write, although those processes were both difficult and painful. But now that the opportunity was offered me, I set to work, with all the energy of which I was capable, to remedy the neglect of years; and to fill up the gap which lay between myself and people of even ordinary education, of the presence of which I became painfully conscious from the moment we left the wilderness behind us, and came into the busy haunts of men. A few months later, we sailed for Europe. We spent a winter in Italy, and then went to France. A year in Paris sufficed to give me a tolerable acquaintance with the French language. It was the intention of Mr. Felix to have gone thence to London; but a pulmonary complaint, to which he had been more or less subject since his youth, set in with increased violence, and he was ordered back to Italy without delay. But it was too late, and six months after that, my kind patron was no more. His death was the greatest loss my life has ever known. I was not forgotten in his will.

"Mr. Felix and I, among other things, had dabbled as amateurs in photography; and when, after his death, I cast about for some means of earning a living, I determined to adopt seriously as my profession what I had hitherto followed merely for pleasure. I obtained an

introduction to a well-known Parisian firm, and the examples of work which I submitted for their inspection were considered so satisfactory that an engagement was at once offered me; and the following two years were spent by me chiefly in Rome and Florence, photographing the most celebrated architectural features of both cities. At the end of that time, I accepted a more lucrative engagement for a London house, which brought me to this country for the first time since I was taken away as a child: and here I am."

The little cuckoo-clock in the corner struck five as John English ceased speaking. Jane Garrod with her apron thrown over her head, sat gazing silently into the glowing embers. It was quite dark outside by this time, but the room itself was filled with a sort of ruddy gloaming from the decaying fire—a warm colouring that brought into strong relief the pale handsome face of the wounded man, and the worn, sharply-cut features of the station-master's wife. John, looking out into the darkness, saw the express-train, with its blood-red, Cyclopiian eye, burst suddenly out of the tunnel; and watched it as it came swiftly on, breathing flame and smoke, and marking its progress with free largeness of fiery cinders. Its wild, defiant shriek seemed to break up Jane's reverie.

"You have not told me all," she said, turning on John abruptly.

"What have I left unsaid?"

"You have not told me anything that has happened to you since you came to Normanford. You have not told me how it is that you know Miss Spencelaugh so well; nor why an active, busy, young gentleman like you has lingered so long in such a little out-of-the-way spot as this."

"I will tell you everything," said John. So he began and told her all that had happened to him since his arrival in Monkshire—all save his love for Frederica. But there was no need for him to speak of that; it was a story known to Jane Garrod without the telling. He told her of his recognition of the portrait of Jeremiah Kreefe, and of Mrs. Winch's strange behaviour. He told

her of the note intended for Lady Spenceclough, sent to Cliff Cottage in mistake, and of his sudden dismissal from Belair the day following the landlady's return home. He told her all that he had gathered from Mr. Edwin, and of Mrs. Winch's prevarication under his cross-questioning. "And now that you know everything," he finished by saying, "you, in your turn, must tell me why you were so startled by seeing me that night at the station. I have waited patiently to learn this for what has seemed to me a very long time; I can wait no longer."

"I was startled by the strong likeness I saw in you to some person whom I knew many, many years ago," said Jane.

"Now that you know me better, do you still see that likeness as strongly as ever?"

"I do—I do."

"Who was that person whom I resemble so strongly?"

Jane Garrod did not speak, but burst into tears, and fell on her knees by the side of John, and kissed his hand, and called him "her darling, her own dear boy."

Amazed, and almost ready to think that she had gone crazed, John stood up, and taking Jane gently by the arms, raised her from the ground. Her straining eyes scanned his features eagerly. "That face, and the mark on his arm," she muttered, "were enough to tell me who he was, without anything more."

"Who am I, then?" asked John, breathlessly. "You kill me by keeping me in this suspense!"

"You are," she said—and then she stopped, for just at that moment she heard her husband's beg-pardon cough, and heavy footsteps on the gravel outside. John seized her by the gown. "In Heaven's name, speak! Who am I?" he said. She turned, and putting her head close to his, whispered a sentence in his ear which sent all the blood to his heart, and left him for a short time without power either to speak or move. Next minute, Abel Garrod, stalwart, ruddy, entered the room, bringing with him a waft of keen wintry air, and the dying fire leaped up for an instant, as if to welcome him,



## CHAPTER XXVI.

## AT PEVSEY BAY.

JANE GARROD went up to Belair the day after that on which John English had told her the story of his life. She went up specially to see Miss Spencelaugh; but on reaching the Hall, she found that Frederica had been summoned away by telegraph a few hours before, to visit an old school-friend who was lying dangerously ill; and as Sir Philip was so far recovered that no immediate danger was apprehended, she had obeyed the summons without delay. Jane Garrod went back home intensely disappointed.

Three days later, John's doctor said: "We are getting on nicely, but slowly. We want change of air; a more bracing climate. We want ozone. We must go to the sea-side for a few weeks. Say to Pevsey Bay. Only twenty miles away. Warm but invigorating. I will give you a prescription to take with you, and will run over to see you once a week, for the present."

So John English went to Pevsey Bay, and took up his quarters at Hammock's Boarding-house, where Jane Garrod had engaged rooms for him. Jane herself, after staying with him for a couple of days, and seeing that his comforts were properly attended to, was obliged to leave him, and go back to her home duties; but made a point of going over by rail twice a week to see how he was progressing. Both by her and John, Miss Spencelaugh's return was impatiently awaited.

Pevsey Bay, even during the height of its little "season," was not a very lively place. But as it generally contrived to feather its nest pretty comfortably during the summer and autumn, it was wisely content to hibernate through the cold dead months that came after. John was, literally, the sole visitor in the little place; and it was only natural that Mrs. Hammock should waken up gleefully from her state of wintry emptiness to welcome this stray bird of passage, and exert herself to retain him in a way that she would have scorned to do during the busy season, when she

and Hammock were obliged to sleep in a damp pantry, so overcrowded were they with visitors; and their eldest boy had to be stowed away on a snug shelf in the coal-cellar.

But it mattered nothing to John English whether Pevsey Bay were lively or dull; he had enough to occupy his mind just then in brooding over Jane Garrod's strange revelation. Jane and he had many conversations together on the all-important topic, after that memorable afternoon on which the station-master's wife had whispered a certain brief sentence in his ear. The incomplete story of each—for Jane also had a story to tell, which we shall hear in its proper place—when added one to the other, formed a whole, which yet had several serious gaps in it. But now that the story, so strangely pieced together, came to be analysed and commented upon again and again, little bits, previously unthought of or forgotten, were added one by one; each one tending to elucidate some point that had seemed obscure before, or to bring into stronger relief some fact hitherto only partially known. Still, they both decided that no active steps could be taken till Miss Spencelaugh should return home. The interests involved were so many and so serious, and the baronet's health was so feeble, that the heiress of Belair naturally came into their minds as the one who must be first consulted; besides which, there was a family secret in the case, which it would not do to reveal to strangers until further counsel should have been sought and given.

John gathered strength daily; but with returning health came a desire to be up and doing; the state of inaction to which he was condemned galled his ardent spirit like a chain. He could not bend his mind just yet to reading or study; and to beguile some of the hours that flagged so wearily in the stagnation of the little town, he drew up a *résumé* or abstract of his case, for the information of Miss Spencelaugh; beginning with the earliest facts of his personal history that were either remembered by himself or had been made

known to him by others, and so setting down one fact after another, in order of time, till he had brought his statement up almost to the date of his writing. He rewrote and remodelled his first rough draft four times before he was satisfied with his work; and next time Jane visited him, the important document was placed in her hands for delivery to Frederica, so soon as the latter should return. The next wet day sent John to his desk again. Nearly a week had passed since he had finished his statement, and in reading over his copy of it this morning, it struck him, after so long an absence, with an air of strangeness, and he saw far more clearly than he had ever done before, how weak his case was, in a legal point of view; how many important links were still wanting to it; and how easily, for want of such links, any clever practitioner would tear it to rags in a court of law. Considering these things seriously, John English came to a sudden resolution—he had always been impulsive and headstrong—which he determined to put into practice without further delay.

Later on, the same day, he walked up to the station, to make some enquiries respecting the trains. He was just leaving the office, when the bell rung for the arrival of the down express, and—with the indolent curiosity of a convalescent who has no better employment for his time than that of looker-on—he lingered to watch it. Now, Pevsey Bay is a junction station, and passengers for Normanford, Kingsthorpe, and other neighbouring hamlets, have here to change carriages, and not unfrequently to play at patience for an odd hour or two, pending the arrival of the branch train. Among the passengers who alighted at Pevsey Bay station, on this particular afternoon, was one whom John English's keen glance at once singled out from the crowd, and from that moment he had eyes for none other.

"It is the lady of my dreams!" he murmured to himself. "What happy chance has brought her hither?"

His heart beat so painfully for a minute or two that he could not move; and before he was able to stir a step, Frederica's gaze, drawn by love's cunning magnetism,

was fixed on his white, intense face and hungry eyes—rested there an instant with a sort of doubting, pained surprise, only to melt next moment into a look of glad recognition. They both blushed as they drew near each other, but for a little while neither of them could speak. Frederica's eyes were full of tears by this time; and John, after the fashion of little boys when they go into strange company, seemed suddenly to have lost his tongue. But their hands met in a long silent pressure, that told more than many words could have done.

"Why don't you offer me your arm, sir?" said Frederica with an April smile. "For I mean to monopolise you till the next train comes up. Can't you guess why? I want to hear all about your strange adventure on Inchmallow, and about the recent attempt on your life. Merely a woman's odious curiosity—nothing more.

"But you are getting better—I can see that," said Frederica, when John had done what he could to satisfy her curiosity; "and I hope to see you soon at Belair. I got the portfolio of photographs you so kindly sent me; and I have more commissions for you than I can remember just now, so you must make haste and get well, or I shall have to give them to some one else. Does not my threat frighten you?"

John declared that he was not in the least frightened; and then he added that he should have much pleasure in waiting on Miss Spencelaugh so soon as his health should be sufficiently restored to enable him to attend to business. But he said nothing about the resolution he had arrived at only that morning, neither did he make any mention of the manuscript which he had intrusted into Jane Garrod's hands for delivery to Frederica. After that, the conversation seemed to languish a little, but neither of them felt inclined on that account to say to the other, "How dull you are!" for Cupid is never more dangerous, never more bent on tying a true lovers' knot, than no mortal fingers can unloose, than when he has least to say for himself.

By and by came Frederica's train. Farewells were

spoken; and John English walked back to his lodgings more confirmed than before to carry out his morning's resolution.

Hammock's boarding-house was managed by Mrs. Hammock, who, in common with others of her tribe at Pevsey Bay, would have contrived to exist very comfortably at the expense of the migratory horde who flocked thither during the "season," had not her laudable efforts been utterly frustrated by an idle, incorrigible dog of a husband, who demanded to be kept "like a gentleman" out of the proceeds of the establishment. Mr. Ferdinand C. Hammock—tall, sandy, with high cheek-bones, a ragged moustache, and a quasi-military swagger, the son of a bankrupt riding-school master—neither could nor would work. He never had worked, and it was not likely that, at his time of life, he was going to degrade himself by doing anything towards earning his own living. So Mrs. H. struggled, and slaved, and scraped at home, while my lord swaggered about the little place as though he were the sole proprietor of it; and had good clothes and good dinners; and looked down contemptuously on his wife's lodgers, and on his wife too, if the truth must be told; and was never without a crown-piece in his pocket wherewith to make merry of an evening at the "Golden Anchor." But this pleasant state of affairs had consequences, one of which was that the rent had perforce been allowed to fall into arrear, so that three half-years were due at the time John English took up his quarters in the establishment. Mr. Dilwood, the landlord, was a forbearing man; but patience has its limits, and of late he had been pressing Mrs. Hammock rather hardly to clear off some portion at least of what was owing. But that hard-working person's little hoard had melted through the fingers of her improvident husband till but very few golden pieces were left, hardly sufficient, in fact, to meet the small, unavoidable expenses arising from day to day during the months that yet remained before the first summer visitor would make his appearance. As for paying the rent—the prospect was an

utterly hopeless one; and Mrs. Hammock had, finally, been obliged to intimate to her husband that it was Mr. Dilwood's intention to put a man in possession, and that bankruptcy stared them in the face. So Hammock went moodily about the little town, brooding over the dark prospect before him, and pulling his ragged moustache more than ever; and only brightening up into a forced merriment when he found himself among a knot of congenial souls in the bar-parlour of the "Golden Anchor."

John English's departure from the little station-house at Kingsthorpe had been witnessed by unseen eyes; and twenty-four hours had not passed after his arrival at Pevsey Bay, before Brackenridge, under the friendly shade of evening, was quietly reconnoitring the new territory. A few cautious inquiries at shops in the immediate neighbourhood of Hammock's, followed his survey of the premises, and then he went home by the last train in high spirits.

One consequence of the chemist's visit to the little watering-place took the shape of a lawyer's letter, received by Mrs. Hammock the following day, in which she was told that unless twelve out of the eighteen months' rent due should be paid within three weeks, further proceedings would at once be taken. The secret of this was that Mr. Dilwood was an old acquaintance of Brackenridge, and under some small obligation to him, and a word from the chemist was sufficient to induce him to "put on the screw," as the latter termed it, in the form of an attorney's letter. Next day, at dusk, Brackenridge strolled into the little watering-place; and later on, when the usual circle met at the "Golden Anchor," there he was, an affable stranger, ready to stand treat for anybody, and greatly interested in all the news of the place. He seemed to take quite a liking to the raffish, shabby-genteel Hammock; and after a time, when the company had thinned somewhat, he contrived to seat himself next to him. Hammock's moodiness had melted by this time before the genial influence of the compounds purveyed at the "Golden

Anchor," and the chemist found him quite ready to drink any quantity of brandy-and-water at any one else's expense, and to declaim loquaciously on everything connected with Pevsey Bay, his own private affairs excepted. But it was to his own private affairs that the chemist wished to bring him. Seeing, therefore, how he shied at the subject whenever it was introduced, even in the most delicate way, Brackenridge decided that a rougher method of treatment must at once be brought to bear. So, at the close of the evening, he and Hammock went out together, arm-in-arm, and, smoking their cigars, wandered down to the jetty to have a last whiff together before parting. Now was Brackenridge's opportunity. "Rather dull here in winter, eh?" said the chemist.

"Awfully slow work," said Hammock, sententiously.

"Let me see. I think I have been told that you keep a boarding-house, or something of that kind. Is it so?"

"Why—yes—that house on the Parade there. My wife manages the business. One must live, you know, eh?"

"Just so; as well make a living that way as any other. Rents rather high in these parts, I suppose?"

"Why—hum—yes, rather high for houses in good positions."

"Ah, well, the profits you make during the season will easily stand it. Come, now, you contrive to net something handsome every year, don't you?"

"People don't do that sort of thing for nothing; it ain't likely. But really, we are getting to talk about matters that ——"

"Then, if the profits are so large," said the chemist, interrupting his new friend, "how does it happen, Mr. Hammock, that you are eighteen months in arrear with your rent?"

Hammock's cigar dropped from between his lips, and he fell back a step or two in sheer amazement. "How the devil——" he began, and then he stepped.

"Mr. Dilwood is a friend of mine," said Brackenridge quietly. "He mentioned to me the other day, as

a matter of business, that he was about to sell you up, and that he had already another tenant in view for your house. Such little accidents will happen now and then, you know."

Hammock was wiping his hot palms nervously with his handkerchief. The idea of his approximate ruin had never been brought so vividly before him, and his craven heart shuddered at the prospect. He at length broke the silence with a volley of frightful oaths, to which the chemist listened with exemplary patience. When he had done, Brackenridge said quietly: "A bad mess, certainly, for any fellow to be in. But there seems to me one way by which you may squeeze out of it."

"Curse you! what are you driving at?" said the other sullenly.

"Listen to me attentively," resumed the chemist. "There is a gentleman staying at your house just now, Mr. John English by name;" and then he took Hammock by the button, and drew him closer, and whispered earnestly in his ear for ten minutes, at the end of which time the two men walked back arm-in-arm towards the town. At the corner of the Parade, they stopped to bid each other good night. "Now, you thoroughly understand what I want?" said the chemist, interrogatively. "You will send me a daily report of your lodger's doings—how he spends his time, who comes to see him, and where he goes when he walks out; but, above all, you will arrange that all letters written by him shall pass through my hands before being posted."

"I understand," said Hammock, sulkily. "The post-office is right at the other end of the town, and my lad Jack always takes Mr. English's letters for him. Jack will do anything for a cigar, and never peach after. The young rascal is only eleven, and he has learned to smoke already."

"Do what I ask you to do," said Brackenridge, "and I will engage that Dilwood shall never trouble you again about the back rent."



Jane Garrod, on her next visit to Pevsey Bay was thunderstruck to find that John English had left his lodgings on the previous day, and gone away, no one knew whither. Had he left no letter, no message for her? she anxiously asked. Neither one nor the other. Mr. English had written a letter, Jack said, which he, Jack, had taken to the post-office; but it was addressed to some gent in London; and Jack having volunteered this information, turned round and winked to himself, and muttered "Walker!"—Mr. English had paid his bill, and had left by the 2.40 P.M. train, added Hammock, and had booked himself through to London. Beyond that, they knew nothing as to the intentions or movements of their late lodger. Jane wondering more than ever, and suspecting some treachery, went herself to the station, and there ascertained that Hammock's statement was true. After this, there was nothing left for her but to go back home. Surely John would write in a day or two; and with this scrap of hope she was fain to comfort herself, in the midst of her surprise at his unaccountable disappearance.

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## CHAPTER XXVII.

### AT GRELLIER'S ALMSHOUSES.

A CHEERLESS wintry morning, with a clouded sky, and a bitter north-east wind blowing shrilly through the denuded woods of Belair. But the discomfort outside served only to enhance the charming coziness of the bright little morning-room which owned Miss Spence-laugh for its mistress. There she sat, the most charming object in that room, in a low chair on one side of the glowing fire-place, her white dressing-robe falling in ample folds around her, and all the wealth of her raven hair, held only by a band of blue velvet, flowing loosely down her back. On the opposite side of the fire-place sat homely Jane Garrod, in strange contrast with this lovely vision. There was an expression of doubt and perplexity on the face of Frederica. She was thinking intently, her cheek resting on the tip of her forefinger,

while her other hand held the Statement which had been drawn up by John English, and sent to her through Jane Garrod, and which she had just finished reading aloud. Each point had been verbally annotated by Jane as she read; and she was now thinking over the strange story which had thus singularly been brought to her knowledge, and as to the merits of which she was now called upon to decide.

"Your eyes are brighter, my bonny one, than when I saw you last," muttered Jane to herself, while waiting for Frederica to speak; "and your cheeks have got back some of the colour they used to have in them when you were a girl. Whatever your trouble was, you have pulled bravely through it. There is one honest heart I know of that loves you fondly. Do *you* feel any faint, feeble flutterings that way, I wonder? I think you do—I think you do."

"This is a very strange story, Jane," said Frederica, at length, "and I really don't know what to think of it. It seems to bear the stamp of truth on every line, and yet some of its statements are almost incredible. The points that still want clearing up are many and difficult; and the whole affair is certainly rendered more complicated by the unaccountable disappearance of Mr. English. Even supposing him to have been suddenly called away, I cannot understand why he has not written to you since his departure."

"There's some treachery at work in the matter, Miss Frederica, you take my word for it," said Jane, with energy.

"I have once or twice had the same thought myself. But, then, you tell me that you have ascertained that Mr. English did really quit Pevsey Bay by a certain train, having taken a ticket for London."

"Just so," said Jane. "Still, I am none the less certain that some treachery has been at work. He may have been enticed away by a false message, and be able neither to write nor to come back. Oh, Miss Frederica, darling, something must be done, and that at once!"

"I feel with you, nurse, that something must be done. The truth or falsehood of this statement must be proved. If what is here put down be true, then has a foul and hideous wrong been done, and the sooner it is brought to light, and the perpetrators of it punished, the better it will be for all of us. If, on the contrary, it be nothing but an ingeniously woven web of lies, then the writer of it——"

"But it is not a web of lies, Miss Frederica, but gospel truth every word of it," burst in Jane, vehemently. "Think of the likeness—so strong that, after twenty years it scared me as if I had seen a ghost. Think of the strange mark on his shoulder—the coiled snake holding the mystic lotus-flower in its mouth. Think over, one by one, the different things he has put down on that paper; and then you must be as firmly convinced as I am that he has not written a word more than the bare truth."

"You are letting your enthusiasm, and your liking for Mr. English, run away with your reason," said Frederica. "In the unexplained absence of that gentleman, and as he has appealed to me, I will, with Heaven's help, have this story sifted to the bottom, and so deal with it as I shall find it true or false!" Her cheeks wore an added flush as she said these words; but in her eyes there was a solemn, almost melancholy light, as though she felt that the duty she had taken upon herself to perform would lead her perforce through dark and troubled waters to a goal which as yet she discerned not at all.

"Spoken like my own brave darling!" said Jane admiringly. "We want nothing but the truth."

Frederica ran her eye over the Statement again. "It almost seems to me," she said, "that it would be better for me not to interfere personally in this matter at all, but to put it, as it now stands, into the hands of my lawyer, Mr. Penning, and leave him to test its value in whatever way he may deem advisable. And yet, the interests involved in it are so peculiar, and there are those under this roof who would be so deeply compro-

mised if what this narrative contains be true, that I cannot help feeling reluctant to let it pass out of my hands without at least giving one person whom it deeply concerns a knowledge of the case equal to my own, so that she may be prepared at the proper time to disprove its statements, should she ever be called upon to do so. Then, again, the story is such an incredible one, and there are so many weak points about it at present, that I question whether quiet, matter-of-fact Mr. Penning would not pooh-pooh it altogether, and smile compassionately upon me for allowing myself to put faith in so palpable an absurdity."

"'Cannot some of these weak points be strengthened?'" said Jane.

"How so?" said Frederica.

"Mr. English makes mention there of a room in which he was shut up before he was taken across the sea—of a room with barred windows, in which there was a hideous bed that frightened him into a fit one day. Now, there must have been such a room, Miss Frederica."

"There may have been such a room certainly, nurse; or it may have had an existence merely in the imagination of Mr. English. But even granting the room to have been a real one, what then? Where are we to find it?—and if found, in what way would it benefit our case?"

"Wait a bit, Miss Frederica, please," said Jane. "Besides what Mr. English has put down on that paper, he told me many little things that came into his memory, bit by bit, when we were talking together about his early life; and many a long talk about it we had. Among other things, he told me something more about that house with the barred windows, which would seem to show that he was shut up there for some time. Whenever he cried to be taken back to the place he had been brought from, and could not be quieted any other way, the people of the home used to take him down stairs, and hold him over a dark hole or well, in one of the lower rooms, into which they threatened to throw

him unless he behaved better. The recollection of that horrible well had been impressed so strongly on his childish mind, that he could still recall the shudder with which, long afterwards, he would awake at night from a dream of being cast headlong into it. Now, there was something in all this that struck me in a way I cannot explain. I've been turning it over and over in my mind—churning it, like—ever since Mr. English told me about it; and it was only this very morning that the idea flashed all at once into my head that the house he spoke about could have been no other than White Grange, a lonely farm-house among the hills, about a dozen miles from Kingsthorpe. You know, Miss Frederica, that I was brought up not many miles from here; and once, when I was a thin slip of a girl, my father, who was a miller, had occasion to go to White Grange on business, and he took me in the cart with him. Whether the windows had iron bars outside them or not, I can't just say; but I do recollect being shown, in one of the outhouses, a deep grim-looking well—they took off the wooden cover, so that I might see down into it—and very frightened I was, more particularly when they told me the story that was connected with it. It was said that more than a hundred years before that time, a traveller, who had lost his way, and had begged a night's shelter at the Grange, had been foully murdered, and his body thrown into the well; and never after that time would anybody touch a drop of the water that was drawn from it. The name of the family that lived at White Grange when I knew it was Sandysen, and they didn't bear an over-good name among us country-folk: many queer things were whispered about them.—Now, supposing, Miss Frederica, that it was really White Grange where Mr. English was shut up as a child, mightn't it be worth our while just to inquire whether any of the family who lived there five-and-twenty years ago can now be found? and if they can be found, whether anything can be got from them as to such a child having been shut up there, and for what purpose? Would it not be worth our while to try this?"

Miss Spenceaugh agreed that it might, perhaps, be worth while to make such inquiries, but was doubtful as to their resulting in anything tangible. It was, however, ultimately decided that Jane should do what she could in the matter, and that no further steps should be taken until she had done so.

So Jane set about making cautious inquiries among her friends and neighbours through the country-side; which inquiries resulted in the discovery that the family that had occupied White Grange twenty years previously were, with one exception, either dead or gone abroad. That one exception was an old woman, now residing in Grellier's almshouses at Eastringham. With this information, Jane went once more to Frederica; and next afternoon the Belair brougham was put into requisition, and the heiress and her humble companion were driven over to the place in question.

Grellier's gift to the poor of Eastringham—to twelve reliels of decayed tradesmen of the burgh—was a foundation of ancient date. It had been in existence for three centuries. But although it had waxed fat and plethoric upon the accumulated interest of its capital, and the increase of revenue derived from the advance in the value of its lands and tenements in different parts of the county, it had not yet seen its way clearly to substitute for the tumble-down, inconvenient, old edifices in which so many generations of poor old women had breathed their last, a row of substantial modern-built cottages; nor to increase the scanty stipend doled out weekly to its ancient recipients, which, in these days, was hardly sufficient to keep body and soul together. But Grellier's charity had a governor and directors of its own; all gentlemen of wealth and standing; who met in the board-room twice a year, to audit the accounts, fill up vacancies, and discuss a choice luncheon from the "Royal Hotel;" and if they were satisfied with the state of Grellier's affairs, surely no one else had any right or reason to complain.

"I want Margaret Fennell. Can you tell me in which of these cottages I shall find her?" asked Frederica of

an old crone who was airing herself feebly in the wintry sunshine.

The old woman put her hand to her eyes, and blinked weakly for a moment or two at the bright vision before her. "Margaret Fennell is it your Leddysnip is axing for?" she said at last in a thin, quavering voice. "There's no such body living here.—Stay a bit, though," she added, with a clutch of her thin brown hand at vacancy. "It's mebbe Owd Meg as your Leddysnip is looking for. She lives, Owd Meg does, in the top house but two; and she's a cat, that's what she is, and everybody will tell you the same. The top house but two, your Leddysnip. And does your Leddysnip happen to have an ounce of tea or a bit of snuff in your pocket, to comfort a poor old body with? It's precious little of either we gets here. They take good care of that—that's what they do." Frederica had dropped some money into the old woman's hand almost before she had done speaking, and so left her, staring speechlessly at the bright silver coins in her skinny palm.

The "top house but two" looked, if possible, more ruinous and unfit for a human being to live in than any of its neighbours, except that it was clean both inside and out, as, indeed, were all the almshouses. The matron was very particular, and properly so, on the score of cleanliness; and had a tongue of her own, which she rattled about the ears of the feeble old dames to some purpose whenever she found anything that offended her nice sense of the virtue that comes next to godliness in her frequent rounds of "sniffing and prying," as her domiciliary visits were irreverently termed by the inmates.

Frederica knocked timidly at the heavy oaken door. "Why don't you come in, you imp—you devil! instead of knocking there? How many times do you want telling?" screamed a harsh, high-pitched voice from within. Frederica opened the door a few inches, and looking in, had a vision of an old woman smuggling a black bottle and a short black pipe rapidly out of sight. Looking again, she saw that this woman was very old, with a hook nose and a pointed chin, which nearly met;

and with black eyes, that still retained something of their former bold bright look. Her long gray hair was without covering of any kind, and fell in a wild dishevelled mass over her shoulders. She was wrapped in an old woollen shawl of many faded colours; and when Frederica saw her first, was crouching over a meagre spark of fire, but rose suddenly as her visitor entered, displaying, as she did so, a form tall beyond the ordinary height of women.

"Beg your pardon, my pretty lady," she said; "but I thought it was that rapsallion of a baker's boy, who always will knock, and trail my poor bones across the floor to open the door for him. Yah! I'll break the bellows over his head next time he comes!" she added viciously. Then changing suddenly into a half-whining, half-caressing tone, she said: "Old Meg can guess what has brought those bright eyes here. Cross her hand with a bonny bit of yellow goold, and she'll tell the beautiful lady her fortune, as predicted by the stars, and confirmed by the changes of the cards, which cannot lie when shuffled by the hands of a wise woman. Cross my palm with a bonny bit of goold, and I'll tell you your fortune true."

"You mistake the purpose which has brought me here," said Frederica with a smile. "I do not want my fortune told at present."

"Then what should bring a fine lady like you to such a hole as this?" said Meg, suspiciously.

"I have come in search of certain information, which I believe you can supply me with."

"Me supply you with information! Nay, nay; you're mistaken there. What should a poor old woman like me know, unless it was the prices of butter and cheese, and such like; with, maybe, now and then a comforting text or two." Her face broadened into a wicked leer as she said these words. "Besides that," she added, "my memory's so bad that at times I can't recollect what happened the day before yesterday, let alone things years ago. Nay, nay, you'll get no information out of Old Meg."



Miss Spencelaugh, in nowise daunted, advanced into the room, followed by Jane Garrod, and stood looking down for a moment or two at the miserable creature, who had sunk into her chair again, and drawing her shawl round her, was cowering over the embers, taking no further heed of her visitors.

"Five-and-twenty years ago, if I am rightly informed," said Frederica, "you went to live with Job Sandysen as housekeeper at White Grange."

"Five—and—twen-ty years ago," muttered Meg, slowly. "That's a long, long time to look back to. Well—maybe I did, and maybe I didn't—what then?"

"One-and-twenty years ago—try to carry your mind back to that time—a child, a boy about five years old, who belonged in no way to any one living in the house, was taken to White Grange. After being shut up there for several weeks in one of the upper rooms—a room with barred windows—he was fetched away after dark, one night, by a man and two women."

"A lame man and one woman!" screamed the hag. "I allus said we should hear of it; I told Nance so a dozen times; and my words have come true after all these years!"

"Then you do recollect the circumstance I mention?" said Frederica, eagerly. In her statement respecting the child she had boldly hazarded a vague surmise as a fact, and she felt that her courage was about to be rewarded.

"Curses on this blabbing tongue of mine!" hissed Meg from between her toothless gums. "You mustn't mind an old woman's wanderings, my sweet miss," she whined. "My head's a bit light at odd times, and then I fancy all sorts of rubbish."

"But I am certain that you can tell me what I want to know," said Frederica; "and I will pay you well for your information." With that, she took out her purse, and counted five sovereigns, one after another, on to the dirty little table. Meg's head came round with a twitch as the pleasant chink of the gold fell on her ear, while over her face there crept such an expression of

mingled greed, cunning, and fiendish malignity, as caused Frederica to draw back in horror. "There are five sovereigns for you," said Miss Spengelaugh with a shudder; "and you shall have five more if you answer my questions truthfully."

Meg's brown, skinny arm, and thin cramped fingers, came suddenly out from the folds of her shawl, and pounced on the gold as savagely as though it were some living thing for whose heart's blood she was hungering. A moment or two she gazed at the bright yellow pieces in her open palm, and then she spat on them. "That's for luck," she muttered. Then producing a dirty bit of rag from some mysterious pocket, she folded the sovereigns carefully in it, and deftly smuggled the package out of sight among her tattered habiliments. "Remember, five more before you go away," she said in an eager whisper.

"I shall keep my promise," said Frederica.

"Then ax me what you like, and I'll answer you as far as I know the truth."

"You remember a child being brought to White Grange twenty-one years ago?"

"Ay, I remember."

"Whose child was it, and what was its name?"

"I dun know."

"Who took it to White Grange?"

"Mrs. Winch, landlady of the 'Hand and Dagger,' at Normanford."

"Who fetched it away?"

"Mrs. Winch, and her brother, the lame doctor—Kruff or Kreefe was his name."

"How long was the child kept at White Grange?"

"For six weeks."

"Was he kept locked up all that time?"

"Yes, all that time, in the strong room at the top of the house. Once he screamed hisself into a fit, and we had hard work to get him round again. Once or twice, when he was in his tantrums—crying to be let out and taken back home—Old Job, he took him down stairs, and taking the lid off the well, threatened to pitch him

headfast in, and so frightened him into being quiet for a while."

"Describe the appearance of the child, as far as your memory will serve to do so."

"He was as handsome a lad as ever I see, with black hair, and a devil of a temper."

"You say that he was fetched away by Dr. Kreefe and his sister?"

"Ay, they came for him one dark night. They had a little covered cart waiting just outside the gate; and they put the lad into it, and drove away with him; and I've never clapt eyes on him from that day to this."

"You are positive that you know nothing as to the child's name or parentage?"

"Nothing at all—I'll take my oath," said Meg, emphatically. "Old Job Sandysen, he knew who the child belonged to; and Jim Billings, he knew; but neither my girl Nance nor me was ever told. Old Job gave Nance and me two sovereigns apiece the day after the lad was taken away, and told us never to say a word, or he'd twist our necks for us. And he would have done it as soon as look at us."

"Job Sandysen has been dead many years, I am told," said Frederica; "but who was Jim Billings? and how did you become aware that he knew anything respecting the child?"

"Jim was a footman at Belair at that time, and was courting my Nance. She, soft-like, as all wenches are when they're in love, let out everything to him about the lad, and asked him whose child he thought it was. Jim laughed at her, and called her a young fool, and said he knew well enow whose child it was, and all about it; but that he wasn't going to tell her or anybody else, because it was a secret, and he meant to make a lot of money out of it."

"And what became of this man? Did he marry your daughter?"

"Not him," said Meg. "He got into trouble soon after that—was mixed up in some way with a robbery—and got twenty years across the herring-pond. Nance

went to see him when he was in the stone-jug, and didn't forget to ask him about the child. You see, we thought we might as well make a bit of money by the secret, now he was going away. But do what Nance would, she couldn't get him to split. 'The secret will keep,' said he. 'I shall be back before ten years are over, and then I shall make my fortune out of it.' But we never saw Jim Billings after that day; and whether he's alive or dead, I neither know nor care."

After a few more questions of minor importance, Frederica laid the remaining five sovereigns on the table, and rose to go. "I shall call and see you another day, if you will let me," she said—"not about this matter, but about yourself. I want to see you with more comforts round you, and in a happier frame of mind than you are at present."

"Ay, ay, bless your sweet face, miss; I shall allus be glad to see you. But Meg has been a bad un all her life, and a bad un she'll die—yes, a bad un she'll die."

Jane Garrod, turning to look as she followed Frederica out of the room, saw Meg winking, and beckoning to her to go back and take a friendly dram out of the black bottle, which she had already brought from its hiding-place.

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## CHAPTER XXVIII.

### A FRUITLESS VISIT.

ON leaving Grellier's almshouses, Miss Spencelaugh drove into Normanford, and was set down at the "Hand and Dagger." After hearing Old Meg's narrative, she had at once decided to call upon Mrs. Winch. There was just a faint possibility, Frederica thought, that when the landlady learned how much was known to her already, she might see the uselessness of further concealment, and deem it best to make a full confession of her share in the abduction of the child. At all events, the chance was one worth trying. What she had just heard at Eastringham only served to confirm more fully

her belief in the truth of John English's strange story. Having taken this matter in hand, she was determined to go through with it, happen what might.

It was the slack time of the day at the "Hand and Dagger," and Mrs. Winch was seated at work in her own little room. She rose in some confusion as Frederica was ushered in, and a dark frown passed like a spasm over her face; but she recovered herself immediately. "This is indeed an honour, Miss Spencelaugh," she said, with a respectful courtesy. "I sincerely trust that Sir Philip is no worse; and her Ladyship—I hope that she is quite well.—Maria, a chair for Miss Spencelaugh.—Will you allow me to offer you a glass of sherry and a biscuit?"

Frederica declined the refreshment, but accepted the chair. She had come in alone, leaving Jane Garrod in the brougham. She was perplexed in what way to begin what she wanted to say. She felt, rather than saw, the landlady's cold, inquisitive eyes fixed upon her; and perceived, more clearly than she had hitherto done, the difficulties of the task before her. She would have felt more reassured could she have seen how timidly the widow's usually fearless heart was beating—could she have known what gnawing anxiety, what haunting fears, were at work behind that pale, colourless face, intent on nothing more important just then, as it seemed, than the neat folding up of a piece of embroidery, the completion of which Miss Spencelaugh's arrival had delayed.

"You are, I believe," said Frederica, "acquainted with a gentleman of the name of Mr. John English?"

"Mr. English? Oh yes, I know him very well," said the landlady, with a ready smile. "He slept here two nights on his first arrival at Normanford; and a more affable, pleasant-spoken gentleman I don't know anywhere."

"Mr. English had, I believe, on one occasion, some conversation with you on a rather peculiar topic. I dare say you know to what I allude."

"Pardon my stupidity, but really I do not," said the

widow, as cool as an icicle. "Mr. English and I had many conversations together. Will you oblige me by giving me more precise details as to the topic in question?"

Frederica flushed slightly. There was a lurking defiance in the widow's manner of saying these words that chafed her. "Mr. English spoke to you on one occasion respecting a child," she said, with that cold metallic ring in her voice which was never heard except when her pride was touched—"a child who was taken to America by your brother, Dr. Kreefe, and his wife. You, Mrs. Winch, were by when the child was put on board ship. Mr. English asked you the child's name, and to whom it belonged; and I am here to-day to ask you the same question."

"Oh," said the widow, with a little shrug, "is that all? What a trifling matter to need so elaborate a preface! I answered Mr. English's question, as I now answer yours, Miss Spencelaugh. The child belonged to a friend of my brother, who had emigrated about a year previously, and Jeremiah agreed to take him out to rejoin his parents at New York. The circumstance was such a trivial one that I had really forgotten it till Mr. English recalled it to my recollection. Mr. English was quite satisfied with my explanation, and I am certainly at a loss to understand why so great a lady as Miss Spencelaugh should——"

"Stop one moment, if you please," said Frederica, coldly. "Mr. English was *not* satisfied with your explanation, otherwise I should not be here to-day. Do you mean to assert positively, Mrs. Winch, that you know nothing more respecting the child who was taken by your brother and his wife to America than you have just now told me?"

"I do assert so, most positively."

"And yet it was this very child, Mrs. Winch, who was taken by you to White Grange; and after being locked up there for six weeks, was fetched away surreptitiously after nightfall by yourself and your brother! And yet you tell me that you do not know its name!"

The widow's pale face grew a shade paler as Frederica spoke, and an evil look came into her eyes.

"Where did you learn all that?" she exclaimed. "A lie! a lie! every word of it, I tell you. And even if it were true, which I deny that it is, what right have you, or any other person, to come prying into my private affairs? I will not be questioned thus about matters that concern myself alone. You have got my answer—I know nothing about the child; and if you question me till doomsday, I have none other to give."

"Take care!" said Frederica, gravely, as she rose from her seat. "The net is closing round you slowly but surely; the links of the chain are being forged one by one, and but few are wanting now. Be warned in time. Reveal everything, and so save yourself while you can yet do so. Soon it will be too late."

"Go, go!" said the widow in a hoarse whisper, with one hand pressed to her heart, while the other pointed to the door. "Go, before I do myself or you an injury. You presume on your position, Miss Spencelaugh, to come and insult me in my own house. But I can bear it no longer. Go!"

Frederica bowed her head, and drew her veil over her face, and passed out slowly without another word.

"Who told her about White Grange, I wonder?" said the widow to herself as soon as the door was closed behind her visitor. "Why, who could tell her but old Meg Fennel! There's no one else left alive that knows of it. To think that the old witch should tell, after keeping the secret so faithfully all these years? But she would sell her own soul for gold. I thought I had buried her alive, put her out of the way of being found by anybody, when I got her into the almshouses at Eastringham. But though they've found out all about White Grange, they've yet to prove who the child was that was taken there; and who is there now living that could tell them that, except her ladyship and myself? And even if, by some miracle, they got to know it, and the worst came to the worst, why, even in that case, we should have nothing really to fear. Ah! Miss Frederica,

dear, it is plain to see who has won your proud heart at last ; but you little dream that at the end of your search you will find yourself in the arms of a skeleton." There was something diabolical in the laugh with which the widow ended these words. Then taking a purse from her pocket, she proceeded to open it, and drew from it a piece of paper folded up into a very small compass, which she opened and smoothed out very carefully. It was a telegram, and the information it conveyed was comprised in one short line. A triumphant smile lighted up the widow's pale face as she read it. "So ends the tragedy," she said. "The heroine may weep for her hero, but he will never come back again ; his is the sleep that knows no waking. I will go up to Belair after dusk this afternoon, and show this paper to my lady. What a weary load it will lift off her heart !" She carefully refolded the telegram, and put it away in her purse. "Poor young gentleman !" she murmured. "How kind, and brave, and handsome he was ! He deserved a better fate.—Maria, bring me a small glass of cognac."

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## CHAPTER XXIX.

### LADY SPENCELAUGH'S APPEAL.

"HER LADYSHIP's compliments, and she will be glad to see you in her dressing-room after breakfast, if you will kindly go as far."

Thus one of the Belair Abigails to Miss Spencelaugh, the morning after Frederica's visit to Grellier's almshouses. More strongly convinced than ever that John English's narrative was based upon truth, and that for her there was now no going back from the cause she had taken in hand, Frederica had pondered through a sleepless night, questioning herself as to what her next step ought to be. She had, at last, decided to send Lady Spencelaugh a copy of John's statement, together with a supplement, embodying the further information given by Jane Garrod, and the result of Frederica's own visit to the almshouses ; with a request that her Ladyship would throw some light upon that portion of the



narrative which seemed to inculcate her in some mysterious way, and to mix up her name in a nefarious transaction, of the workings of which she might, after all, be in utter ignorance. In any case, Frederica decided that she would take no unfair advantage of Lady Spencelaugh: every particular of the case, as known to herself, should be made known to her Ladyship also. But this request for a personal interview changed Frederica's decision. "I will see her, and tell her everything," she said to herself. "A few simple words of explanation from her may show how entirely innocent she is of any complicity in this dark plot. I pray Heaven that it may prove so!"

"My dear Frederica, this is really very kind of you," said Lady Spencelaugh, with a languid smile, as she extended the tips of her fingers to Miss Spencelaugh. "My nerves are very variable this weather, and I did not feel equal to the task of looking you up in your own rooms. You have breakfasted, of course? Yes. How I wish that I possessed your energetic habits, and talent for early rising! It is a talent, dear, depend upon it, that of getting up early these dark, cold mornings. But sit down, pray. Not so far off. That is better. I want to have a cosy chat with you this morning. And yet, how to begin? Ah, I see your eyes are taking in the pattern of that embroidery. Quite new, I assure you. Clotilde did it. She is certainly clever with her needle; but in some things, a pig—yes, *cara mia*, an absolute pig. But her accent is good: I am ready to admit that: good, that is to say, for a person in her position."

Although the day was still young, Lady Spencelaugh had been carefully made up, and looked very fresh and charming in her demi-toilet, as she dawdled with her dry toast and chocolate. Frederica wondered in her own mind what her aunt's long preface would lead to: generally speaking, her Ladyship was rigidly polite, and as sparing of words as the occasion would admit of, in her intercourse with Miss Spencelaugh.

"You know, dear, I am much older than you," resumed her Ladyship, a little diffidently; "and you must

allow me, for once, to use a matronly privilege, and give you a little wholesome advice."

"Go on, please," said Frederica, with a haughty little bend of the head.

"I have lately been informed—how, it matters not," continued her Ladyship, "that, for a short time past, you have been mixing yourself up in the affairs of a certain Mr. English, a wandering photographer, whom Sir Philip was so injudicious as to ask here to dinner once or twice. I do not seek to know your reasons for doing this, my dear child: that you had some reasons, I will at once assume: but however strong they may have seemed to you, *I* have every reason to believe that you have been imposed on. In any case, for you to go roaming about the country, looking after this young man's affairs, is, to say the least of it, both unladylike and ridiculous. Excuse me, dear, if, in the excitement of the moment, I use strong language; but, really, the case seems to me one which demands a strong remedy. The health of Sir Philip, as you are aware, is too precarious for him to be troubled with such details; and this being the case, I consider myself as being in some measure his delegate, and assume an authority in speaking to you which on any other occasion I should be sorry to exercise."

"Pray make no excuse on that score," said Frederica, coldly. "But before deciding that I have been either unladylike or ridiculous, would it not be well to inquire more particularly into the nature of the business which has made me appear either one or the other in your Ladyship's eyes?"

"Certainly not," said Lady Spencelaugh, hastily. "I have no wish to know more of this wretched matter than I know already."

"But I think it highly necessary that your Ladyship should at least know as much of the case as I do. When you sent for me, I was about to copy out a certain Statement which is in my possession, and send the copy to you, together with the outline of certain other facts with which I have become acquainted."

"I am very glad you did no such thing," said her Ladyship, warmly.

"Let me, at least, fetch the Statement, and read it to you."

"Certainly not: I should consider myself degraded by listening to such a farrago of nonsense."

"Your Ladyship cannot know how serious are the interests involved, or you would not speak thus."

"I know quite sufficient already, and I have set my face against knowing more. I know that this man—this John English, as he calls himself—has put forward some preposterous claim, by which he seeks to make people believe that he is a great man who has been defrauded out of his rights. I know further, and from reliable sources, that he is a common swindler and impostor; and that this is neither the first nor the second occasion that he has striven to make himself out as a scion of some family of position; and at the present time, as you yourself are no doubt aware, he is not to be found—no one knows whither he has gone. Is it not so?"

"It is," said Frederica, a little shaken.

"But you don't know the reason of his sudden disappearance," went on her Ladyship. "Well, I happen to be in a position to enlighten you. He fled to avoid being arrested and brought to account for his previous impostures. I think he is too wary ever to show his face in this part of the country again; but should he do so, and I become aware of it, I shall certainly have him apprehended as a notorious swindler."

Frederica was staggered. The audacity of Lady Spencelaugh verged on the sublime. But her Ladyship's tone, bold as it was, was wanting in sincerity, and carried no conviction to her listener's heart. "If you would but allow me to tell you all that I know of this matter!" said Frederica in a voice of genuine entreaty.

"Certainly not, Frederica; and I am astonished, after what I have said to you, that you should still persist in such a foolish request. For the heiress of

Belair to have her name mixed up in any way with that of this impostor, is a degradation to the family, and one which, were it to reach the ears of Sir Philip, might well, in his delicate state of health, prove fatal to him. Take my advice, my dear child, and have nothing further to do with this man or his affairs. He is trying to compromise your name by trading on your good-nature."

Frederica wrung her hands. "Heaven help me!" she exclaimed. "I know not what to do."

"Do? Why take my advice, of course," said Lady Spencelaugh, "and don't allow yourself to appear any further in this wretched business."

Frederica sat in painful silence for a few moments, watched eagerly by Lady Spencelaugh. "No," she said at length as she rose from her chair, while a deep flush overspread her face—"No, I cannot think that Mr. English is an impostor. I believe him to be as true and loyal a gentleman as ever breathed. Mistaken he may be, but not intentionally so, I am sure. That he will some day come back, if alive, I fully believe. Meanwhile, I will comply with your Ladyship's wishes in one respect; I will take no further steps in this matter personally, but will put it at once into the hands of Mr. Penning, my lawyer, and leave him to deal with it in whatever way he may think best."

With a little tremulous cry, Lady Spencelaugh started forward from her easy, lounging posture. "Frederica Spencelaugh, you will do no such thing!" she exclaimed. "Do you want to kill your uncle, rash girl? and such a scandal would kill him."

"It is too late now for me to go back," said Frederica, sadly. "The task was not of my seeking; but now that it has been given me to do, I dare not shrink from it till I arrive at the truth. Oh, dear Lady Spencelaugh, pray believe me when I say——"

She stopped suddenly, affrighted at the strange look on the face of the woman before her. Her Ladyship's mask was pushed aside for a moment, and the lurking fiend behind peeped out in all his native hideousness.

"Am I, then, to understand that it is your fixed determination not to give this matter up?" asked Lady Spencelaugh in a tone of ice.

Frederica bowed her head, but did not speak. Lady Spencelaugh touched the silver gong at her elbow "The door, for Miss Spencelaugh," she said to Clotilde. Frederica passed out slowly and sorrowfully without another word.

"Let her do her worst," said Lady Spencelaugh to herself as soon as she was left alone; "I can still defy her—defy all of them. I shall triumph in spite of everything—but at what a terrible cost!"

She took a scrap of paper from her sachet, and opened it. It was the telegram which had been received by the landlady of the "Hand and Dagger" on the previous day. Its contents were embodied in one line; and that one line ran as under: "The *Ocean Child* has foundered with all on board." Lady Spencelaugh's eyes glittered, and her mouth puckered into an evil smile as she read these words. "It's an ill wind that blows nobody any good," she muttered as she replaced the telegram in her sachet.

The fast afternoon train of that same day bore Frederica Spencelaugh and Jane Garrod swiftly Londonwards.

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## CHAPTER XXX.

### JIM BILLINGS IS WANTED.

MISS SPENCELAUGH took up her quarters at the house of a friend in Harley Street, and was waited upon the morning after her arrival in town, by Mr. Penning.

A quiet, shrewd, middle-aged gentleman was Mr. Penning; the embodiment of prosaic common sense. If there were a spark of imagination anywhere about him, he concealed it so carefully from the world that its presence was never suspected.

"Oblige me by reading this paper carefully through," said Frederica, as she gave John English's Statement into the lawyer's hands.

Quietly observant of him as he sat opposite to her, Frederica saw his white eyebrows go up several times in the course of the reading, but he said no word till he had mastered the last line. Then folding up the document carefully, and allowing his double eye-glass to drop from its resting-place on his nose, he turned a face of mild inquiry on Frederica, and said: "A singular document, my dear Miss Spenceclough—a very singular document! Have you any corroborative evidence to offer as to the truth of its statements?"

Frederica gave him an epitome of her visit to Grelhier's almshouses, and then called Jane Garrod into the room. Mr. Penning listened attentively to Jane's narrative, and took notes of the chief points. "This, I presume, completes the case as far as it goes at present?" said the lawyer, when Jane had left the room.

Yes, Frederica said, that was all the evidence she had to offer.

"In the present state of the affair," resumed the lawyer, as he saw Frederica's eyes fixed inquiringly on him, "you must excuse me from offering any opinion as to the value or worthlessness of what I have just heard and read. I have seen so many strange cases in my time which seemed at the first glance to be built up of such strong evidence that it was almost impossible to doubt their validity, and which yet, when they came to be looked into, were found to be utterly worthless, that I have learned at last to doubt everything that is at all out of the common course. There is certainly an air of romance and improbability about Mr. English's Statement; but, for all that, it may contain an underlying vein of truth, sufficient to necessitate further investigation. As you tell me that you are determined to go on with the case, I will at once put it (with certain reservations) into the hands of one of my people. The whole affair is certainly complicated by the unexplained absence of Mr. English. Were he here, our first duty would be to ask him to prove his identity with that of the child taken to America by the man Kreefe and his

wife, in support of which fact we have nothing at present beyond his bare word. As, however, he is not here, the first point for us to take up is to try and track out this Jim Billings, who is said to be the only person able to throw any light on the parentage of the child taken to White Grange by Mrs. Winch. Mind you, I think the chances of our finding him, even if he be still alive, are very faint indeed. But we will try; and meanwhile, my dear young lady, you must wait patiently till I bring you some news as to the success or non-success of my efforts. One last word at parting—don't be over-sanguine."

The mention of Lady Spencelaugh's name was studiously avoided both by the lawyer and Frederica.

So Jane Garrod went back home, and Miss Spencelaugh waited in Harley Street for the news that seemed so long in coming. Three weeks passed away before she saw anything further of Mr. Penning, but at the end of that time he called upon her.

"I always said Meriton was a sharp fellow," he began, after the usual greetings, "and this case proves the correctness of my opinion. He has actually hunted down this man Billings, and is watching for him at the present moment, as a terrier watches for a rat, ready to pounce on him the moment he makes his appearance. Excuse the vulgarity of the simile, my dear Miss Spencelaugh, and listen to my explanation.—Meriton ascertained, in the first instance, at which town Billings was convicted; the nature of his sentence; and the date of his departure for Australia. There you would naturally think that all trace of the fellow would be lost, at least on this side the water. But not so. Meriton, by some means best known to himself, and with the assistance of his good friends the police, discovered, from some register of such transactions which is kept at head-quarters, that Billings was let loose with a ticket-of-leave before the expiration of his sentence, and came back to this country about eight years ago. Following up the clue thus obtained, Meriton found further, that Billings had not been many

weeks in England before he was again convicted, on a charge of robbery with violence, and was again sentenced—this time, to ten years' penal servitude. That sentence—reduced by a term of two years—he has been working out at Portland, and it expired a fortnight ago. But, as if it were destined that he should not escape us, Billings is still there, in the infirmary, suffering from a severe accident which he met with while working in the quarries. Meriton is waiting close at hand, ready to pounce on him the moment he shows his scoundrel's face outside the walls; and if this fellow has any secret worth knowing, Meriton is just the man to twist it out of him. We shall probably have further information in a few days; but don't be over-sanguine, my dear young lady—don't be over-sanguine."

Three days later, Mr. Penning came again, bringing a letter with him. "News at last," he said. "But I had better, perhaps, read Meriton's letter, and enable you to judge of its importance yourself." He adjusted his eye-glass with a little show of importance, and then read as under:—

"MY DEAR SIR,—As my last letter informed you, I have been dawdling away my time here for more than a week, awaiting the discharge of Billings. I had been apprised by a friendly official that he would leave the infirmary this morning, and I took him in tow the moment he was outside the gates. I had secured a snug little place beforehand, where our interview would not be likely to be interrupted. Billings is evidently much reduced by his illness, and therefore, perhaps, more amenable to my little persuasive ways than he would otherwise have been, which is so far fortunate for us. A more thorough scoundrel I think I never talked to. Not that he is by any means unintelligent, or wanting in shrewdness, but in that he is so thoroughly brutalised by the kind of life which his crimes have compelled him to lead. He was suspicious of me from the first moment. 'Ah,' said he, 'such gents as you don't take any interest in coves like me unless you have got some end of your own to serve.' 'Quite right,' I



said ; ‘I have got an end to serve, and if you will come quietly with me, I’ll tell you what it is.’ The moment I spoke of White Grange, he started guiltily. Then with a sneer and an oath, he exclaimed : ‘That’s the business you have come about, is it ? But you’re not going to get anything out of me about White Grange. I’ve not kept the secret all these years to be carneyed out of it by a white-faced fox like you. I know a trick worth two of that.’ I really thought at one time that he was going to prove impracticable. But after a good dinner, followed by an ample supply of old rum and strong tobacco, he became more amenable to reason ; and not to trouble you, sir, with useless details, I did actually succeed in talking him over, and in inducing him to see on which side his bread was buttered ; and I may be allowed to say that I felicitate myself a little on the victory. The terms are rather high, I must confess, but a lesser figure would have been of no avail. In return, I have obtained full information as to the name and parentage of the child ; and Billings has consented to lie quietly by for a few weeks, in case he should be required as a witness. Further details I reserve till I see you. But as you will probably be anxious to know exactly what it is that I have been told, and as I think it hardly advisable to trust such information to this letter, I will telegraph to you in cipher to-morrow morning, half an hour after post-time, as I shall go on from here to Exeter to see Mr. Collinson, *re* the disputed will-case.

“Yours respectfully,

“FRANK MERTON.”

“You have got the telegram ?” said Frederica, eagerly, when Mr. Penning had finished reading the letter.

“I have,” said the old lawyer, gravely. He saw that Frederica’s eyes were fixed anxiously on him. Writing materials were on the table, so he took a strip of paper, and writing a few words on it, handed it across to her. “That is a copy of Meriton’s telegram,” he said.

Frederica’s cheek grew pale as she read, and next

moment tears sprang to her eyes. "Oh, Mr. Penning," she exclaimed, "what terrible mystery is here? My poor dear uncle——"

There was a knock at the door, and a servant entered with a salver, on which lay a strange-looking letter, addressed to Miss Spenceclough. Frederica opened it. It was another telegram.

"Sir Philip Spenceclough is dying. Come at once."

"Pray Heaven that I be not too late to tell him this strange news!" said Frederica through her tears.

"Better that he should die in ignorance of it, my dear young lady," said the old lawyer, gently—"far better that he should die in ignorance of it."

Five hours later, Frederica alighted at the porch of Belair. The housekeeper, with a sorrowful face, was waiting to receive her. "My uncle——" said Frederica, and then she stopped, reading but too clearly in the face of the other the tidings she dreaded to hear.

"Sir Philip died three hours ago," said the housekeeper. "Your name was the last word on his lips."

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## CHAPTER XXXI.

### WHITE GRANGE.

THE lone farmhouse known as White Grange was buried from the world among the bleak, desolate hills and solitary sheep-walks which stretch from the sea on one side, across the north-eastern corner of Monkshire, almost to the edge of the lovely valley in which Normandford lies warm and sheltered; beyond which the country becomes more fruitful and open, if less picturesque. White Grange was a gray, old, storm-beaten building, and bore the date of 1695 carved above its rude porch. Near it stood a barn and a few other out-buildings, the whole surrounded by a ruinous, moss-grown wall; beyond which you came at once upon the bleak, high moorland, open to every wind that blew. In one of these out-houses was the well from which in former times the family supply of water had been drawn. Connected with this well, there was a dark story of a murdered traveller

whose body had been thrown into it ; which, whether true or false, gave the place an uncanny reputation through the country-side.

White Grange seems to have been unfortunate in its tenants for a long series of years. Such a story as that of the murdered traveller would hardly attach itself to any reputable household ; and old Job Sandysen, as we have seen, was by no means the most respectable of men. The farm was now held by a brother-in-law of Job, a man named Nathan Orchard, to whom the family reputation clung tenaciously, and not, perhaps, without reason. He was a hard-drinking, hard-swearing, money-grasping old reprobate, this Nathan Orchard ; disliked and feared at every market and country fair which he attended. Although no overt act of dishonesty could fairly be laid to his charge, there were whispered rumours in plenty, among those of his own station in life, of acts that any honest Monksshire farmer would have blushed to own. Of sorry, spavined hacks doctored up and sold at distant fairs as sound young horses ; of mildewed wheat with a covering of wholesome grain, sold under a fictitious name and address ; of a forged Bank of England note for fifty pounds traced home to him, which he swore to having received from some unknown man in part-payment of an account ; together with other trifles needless to specify here. Nathan's household consisted of himself and four children—two sons and two daughters, all grown up ; together with an old crone, who acted the part of domestic drudge. A rough, ignorant, hard-living crew they were, the sons following closely in the footsteps of their father, and the two girls being duplicates in softer clay of their brothers.

In a room on the upper floor of White Grange, two women were seated one wintry afternoon. It was a room with a wide, old-fashioned fire-place, and a stout oaken door, and a thick beam across the ceiling—a beam with a strong hook in it, from which depended a fragment of rope, darkly suggestive of a foregone suicide. A room with two diamond-paned windows, across each of which, on the inside, ran two stout iron bars, in which respect

they differed from any other windows in the house. Why the windows of this room should be barred, rather than those of any other room, was one of the mysteries of White Grange which Nathan Orchard himself would have been quite unable to explain.

The younger of the two females, a stout, ruddy-checked lass, was seated at one of those old-fashioned spinning-wheels which are becoming rarer every day, and crooning some country ditty to herself as she worked. She was Nathan Orchard's youngest daughter. The elder of the two females is known to the reader already, she being, in deed, none other than Madame Marie, Jane Garrod's sometime lodger at Kingsthorpe station, and the woman of whose murder Mr. Duplessis had been wrongfully suspected. But she was much changed since seen by us last. In the first place, there seemed nothing left of her but skin and bone, so thin and fleshless had she become. Her long black hair had all been cut off during the fit of raving madness which supervened upon her abduction and forcible confinement at White Grange; and although it had grown somewhat since that time, it was still as short as that of a man. Her dress, too, was rather out of the common way, consisting outwardly, as it did, of a red flannel dressing-robe, which, although it reached the ground when she walked, did not hide, as she sat there, her bare feet, thrust loosely into a pair of old slippers. It was her whim to be dressed thus, and neither persuasion nor threats could induce her to alter the style of her costume. Just now, she was painfully and laboriously busy with her needle, stitching a doll's clothes: that was her occupation day after day, the dressing of dolls, and instructions were given that her whim in this respect should be gratified. A quiet, harmless form of madness that expends itself on such trifles, is infinitely preferable to the vagaries of a raging lunatic. So she dressed and undressed her dolls, of which she had about a dozen in all; and talked to them, and scolded them, and caressed them, as any child of six might have done. She had a sweet voice; and sometimes, in the twilight, she would sing little French love-songs to her dolls, trifles which

had in them a pathos all their own, such even as touched sometimes—although she did not understand the words—the unsusceptible heart of Peg Orchard, her youthful jailer. Sometimes she would fall into a fit of sullen brooding, which would last for a couple of days, during which time she neither ate nor spoke, but would pass hour after hour crouched on the old-fashioned window-seat, staring out through the barred panes with such a hopeless, far-away look in her eyes as might have moved any one to pity. What she thought about at such times, no one ever knew. Perhaps, in her disordered mind, pictures of happy days long past, mirrored themselves brokenly, as in a troubled pool; perhaps she was brooding darkly over her wrongs, and striving to piece together some wild scheme of revenge. These sullen moods always ended in an outburst of hysterical sobs and tears, which did not cease till her little strength was utterly exhausted, when she would lapse into a deep, deathlike sleep as she lay on the floor; a sleep which would last for twelve or fourteen hours; after which she would awake, as light and happy as a child, and call for food and brandy, and begin to dress her dolls again, and to sing her little love-songs, as though she had not a care in the world.

Peg and Madame had not been together all this time without learning to like one another, each in her own peculiar way. Peg, while being the most faithful and incorruptible of jailers, still contrived to secure for her charge many little indulgences, chiefly in the way of food; for Madame had always been nice in her eating, and the fare at White Grange was ordinarily of the coarsest kind. Madame was not ungrateful; and in her calmer and saner moments, would do her best to reciprocate the girl's kindness. Thus, she taught Peg to improve her appearance by compressing her waist, and keeping her shoulder-blades in their proper place; thereby necessitating an upright carriage of the person. And as Madame prided herself on her taste, and was dexterous with her needle, she so altered and improved Peg's Sunday frock—lengthening the body, and puffing the sleeves, and imparting to it a graceful fall behind—

that that young person felt she had never cut such a fashionable figure before. Then she taught Peg how to dress her hair in a more elegant style, and gave her the recipe for a wash that was warranted to beautify the complexion, however tanned or freckled it might be. Peg's heart was finally won when Madame presented her with the rings out of her own ears; only Peg was afraid to wear them, lest her greedy old father should force her to give them up, that he might pawn or sell them.

Sometimes, in mild, open weather, there would come over Madame a desire to exchange her close, shut-up room for the fresh air outside. At such times she would induce Peg to ask permission from the old man for them to walk in the orchard for half an hour. Sometimes the permission was given, sometimes it was not. When the answer was favourable, Madame would wrap a thick shawl round her, and taking Peg's arm, would pace till she was tired the gravelled walk which ran from end to end of the neglected strip of ground which, by some strange perversion of terms, was known as "the orchard." Mad though Madame might be on some points, she was never mad enough to attempt to escape while taking her out-door exercise. In a personal encounter she would have stood no chance against the stalwart Peg; and the fleet-footed farmer's daughter would have run her down before she could have got twenty yards away.

It was while taking one of these quiet walks, in charge of Peg, that Madame's sharp eyes caught sight of something unusual lying half-concealed among the thick grass. She repassed it again and again before she could make out clearly that it was nothing more than a rusty old knife, and then she could have screamed aloud with all a maniac's fearful glee at sight of such a priceless treasure. But how to secure it without being seen? Disengaging her arm suddenly from Peg's, she seated herself on the grass close to the knife, so that a fold of her shawl hid it from view. After that, it was easy to push it unobserved up her sleeve. When she got back

to her own room, and the key was turned on her for the night, she brought forth her treasure, and kissed it, and stuffed her handkerchief into her mouth to smother the wild bursts of laughter that would not be kept back when she thought how cleverly she had deceived them all, and what pretty things it was possible to accomplish even with such an ugly weapon as a rusty knife. There was a little bit broken away from the under part of one of the window-seats, leaving a small cavity between the woodwork and the bricks; and there, after much painful cogitation, she hid her treasure.

Madame was in one of her better moods this wintry afternoon, but hardly as talkative as usual; and as the shadows outside grew deeper, Peg, too, became mute, and the silence was broken only by the whirl of the spinning-wheel, or the weird muttering of the wind in the wide old chimney. At length Marie flung down her sewing with a petulant air. "There! I can see no longer," she exclaimed. "So, Elise, poor darling, will have to go without her petticoat to-night, for I can't bear stitching by candle-light. Do, my dear child, go down-stairs and bring me up a cup of tea and a candle." She listened intently without stirring till Peg's footsteps had died away down stairs; then she rose, and crossing the floor with quick, noiseless steps, drew the knife from its hiding-place. "A few more nights and I shall be free," she muttered to herself. "The bar is nearly through, and soon the cage will be empty and the bird flown. Another windy night," she added, peering with white face and straining eyes into the gathering gloom outside. "The wind is Marie's friend. I like the sound of his rough voice; I like to hear him rattling the doors and windows, and shaking the crazy old house in his burly arms. He comes across the waste at midnight to summon me to my task. Then, when everybody in the house is fast asleep, and they think I am asleep too, I slip quietly out of bed, and begin my work; and oh! what weary work it is, sawing away, all in the dark, at the rotten old bar with my trusty friend here. But when the first streak of gray shows across

the moorland, then I put my knife away, and creep back to bed with such aching bones, and such feet of ice. And when Peg comes in with my cup of tea, looking so fresh and innocent, I hide my head under the clothes, and laugh to myself to think what a simpleton she is, and how I am deceiving them all. And *he* is here! I know it. Sometimes I hear his voice. Black-hearted monster! I will be revenged—revenged—revenged on you before I go! But when I try to think how this must be, my head begins to ache, and motes, like drops of blood, dance before my eyes. But it will all come to me suddenly, like a flash of lightning, at the right moment. Yes, a few more nights, and the cage will be broken, and the bird flown. Oh, what fun it all is!”

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## CHAPTER XXXII.

### THE READING OF THE WILL.

A WINTRY night, starless and lowering, with a bleak wind moaning drearily through the woods of Belair like a voice of sorrowful warning. Eight o'clock is striking by the turret-clock as the great doors of the Hall are flung wide open to let out for the last time him who has so long been master of that stately home. His pleasant voice and genial laugh will never more be heard within its rooms; never more will his tall, slender form and white head be seen by tenant or farm-labourer in field or coppice, or at friendly rent-day feast. All that is left on earth of Sir Philip Spencelaugh, is about to cross the threshold of his home for the last time; and to-morrow a new master will reign at Belair.

One by one, from a side-door, dark-cloaked figures to the number of thirty or forty come quietly out, each of them carrying a lighted torch; and range themselves in front of the main entrance. Presently the coffin makes its appearance, borne on the shoulders of men who have worked on the estate all their lives—men who have loved and respected him they are carrying, as their greatest earthly benefactor. Slowly and tenderly, down the wide, shallow steps, they bear their solemn burden,



over which a great pall is now thrown. Close behind, in solitary state, comes the son and heir, a tall, graceful young man, with a worn, effeminate face; genuinely sorry for the loss of the kind-hearted old man he is following; half angry with himself because his eyes *will* remain so obstinately dry; with yet a lurking feeling of satisfaction in one corner of his heart, which will not be quite trampled out, that he is now, really and veritably, Sir Gaston Spencelaugh—that he may now clear off those confounded post-obits, and be his own master, with plenty of ready money, for the future.

So, down the main avenue of the Park the long procession slowly moved, lighted up by the lurid blaze of the torches, which showed from a distance like gigantic fire-flies among the trees. Behind Sir Gaston, at a respectful distance, came a numerous array of the personal friends of the dead man: magnates of the county; friends of the cover-side and the stubble-field; men who not seldom had sat at his table; men at whose houses he had visited, and to whose wives and daughters he had been well known. Behind these, again, came a long string of humbler friends—small farmers and labourers on the estate, whose grief for the loss of the man they were following was probably quite as genuine as that of more aristocratic friends.

Little groups of country people, women and children mostly, whose husbands and brothers formed part of the procession, were scattered about the Park close to the line of march; and many a tear was shed, and many a blessing invoked to the memory of the benefactor they would never see again. With such accompaniments was Sir Philip Spencelaugh borne to his grave.

Never had the little church of Belair been more densely crowded than it was on the night of the baronet's funeral. The first to enter it, and the last to leave it, were two women, who sat in an obscure corner of the gallery, and the hoods of whose black cloaks completely hid their faces from observation. When the solemn service was at an end—when the body had been lowered into its resting-place in the vault underneath

the chancel—when the vicar's last Amen had been said, and the last notes of the choir had died away into silence, these two hooded women were the last of all there to lean over the dark cavity in the floor, and bid farewell in tearful silence to him who slept so soundly below. Then homeward through the already deserted Park by near ways well known to themselves.

These were Frederica Spencelaugh and Jane Garrod.

Frederica had passed only one night at Belair after her return from town. Now that its master was dead, she felt that not without derogation to herself could she stay there any longer. As the antagonist of Lady Spencelaugh in the course which she, Frederica, was fully determined to pursue, she felt that for the future her home must be elsewhere; so she went to her friend, Mrs. Barber, of Ashleigh Park, and there took asylum for a week or two. She had telegraphed for Mr. Penning on the day following her uncle's death; and that gentleman, acting on her instructions, had intimated to Mr. Greenhough, the family lawyer, that he should be prepared, on the reading of the will, to put in certain evidence which would go far to prove that Gaston Spencelaugh was not the rightful heir to the entail and title of his father.

The reading of the will was fixed to take place in the great drawing-room of Belair at ten o'clock on the morning after the funeral. Mr. Greenhough, instructed by Lady Spencelaugh and Mrs. Winch as to the nature of the evidence which was likely to be put in by Mr. Penning in opposition to the natural and lawful claim of Sir Gaston, pool-pooled the whole affair cheerfully; and hinted delicately how sorry he was to find that a lady for whom he entertained so profound a respect as he did for Miss Spencelaugh, should have lent herself so credulously to the schemes of an impostor. Under the influence of this mild tonic, and the exordiums of her stanch friend Mrs. Winch, her ladyship's drooping courage revived in some measure; and it was with tolerable composure both of mind and body that she took her seat, on the eventful morning, in the great

chair of carved oak, which had been brought from the library on purpose; and so sat, with Gaston on her right hand, to hear the reading of her husband's will. Her mourning became her admirably. The style of her corsage, and the cut of her sleeves, had been a source of some anxiety to her. But little Miss Penny, assisted by a hint now and then from Clotilde, had overcome all difficulties admirably; and nothing could have been more becoming, and at the same time more pensively stylish, than her Ladyship's toilet on this her first appearance in public in her new *role* of widow.

At the opposite end of the long table sat Frederica, looking very pale, but very lovely. The executors named under the will were Sir Michael Casey, a middle-aged Irish baronet, who resided a few miles from Belair; and Dr. Allen, the vicar of Normanford, one of Sir Philip's oldest friends. Both these gentlemen followed Lady Spencelaugh into the room, and sat down opposite Mr. Greenhough the lawyer. There, too, were assembled Mrs. Jones the housekeeper, and Mr. Bellamy the steward, and a few of the older domestics, whose grief for the loss of their master was probably tempered by some natural anticipations of a legacy. Discreetly in the background sat Dr. Roach, the great medical luminary of the district, blandly unconscious, to all outward appearance, that his name was mentioned in the will of his late esteemed patient, although his friend, Mr. Greenhough, had whispered that pleasing fact in his ear as they drove home from the funeral together on the preceding night.

A very brief abstract of the contents of Sir Philip Spencelaugh's will, as read slowly and distinctly by Mr. Greenhough, is all that need be given here. The Belair and Hillgrove estates were both entailed, and beyond these the amount of property left for division was not very considerable. The savings of the baronet's later years, consisting chiefly of securities in various public undertakings, amounting in the aggregate to about fifteen thousand pounds, together with a small banker's balance, were all left to Gaston, burdened only with a

few legacies to certain old servants, and the cost of a few mementoes to the executors and other friends. To Lady Spenceclough was left, for her own absolute disposal, the small Norfolk estate of Dene Towers, of the value of five hundred pounds per annum; with the further addition of a life-charge on the general estates of four hundred a-year more. Frederica's name was mentioned last of all. We give the extract relating to her in its entirety:

"To my well-beloved kinswoman, Frederica Mary Spenceclough" (so ran the will), "I give and bequeath the necklace and coronet of diamonds, formerly the property of my mother; together with the miniatures, painted on ivory, of her father, my dear cousin and companion-in-arms, and myself, which will be found in the top left-hand drawer of my private bureau. These (knowing her to be in no need of worldly goods), together with an old man's love and blessing, are all that I have to bequeath to the aforesaid Frederica Mary Spenceclough; but they will be enough for her to remember me by."

Mr. Greenhough took off his spectacles, and proceeded slowly to fold up the will. Mrs. Jones took the hint, and rising, dropped a stately courtesy to my Lady, and sailed out of the room, followed by the other domestics. An uneasy brooding sense, as of a moral thunder-cloud about to burst close over their heads, rested upon the majority of those now left in the room—for it had been whispered about that something strange would follow upon the reading of the will. Mr. Greenhough proceeded, in the midst of profound silence, to rub his spectacles deliberately with his pocket-handkerchief, then to adjust them carefully on his nose; and then to select a letter from a bundle of other documents, all labelled and tied together with red tape.

"Your Ladyship, and gentlemen," began Mr. Greenhough, "I have here a communication of a very singular character, received by me five days ago, and signed by a gentleman of the name of Penning, who is, I believe, like myself, a lawyer, and who, in this matter, is acting

under instructions from Miss Spencelaugh. Before laying this document before you, Miss Spencelaugh will, perhaps, allow me to ask her one question ? ”

A slight motion of Frederica's head gave Mr. Greenhough the required permission.

“Is it your deliberate intention, Miss Spencelaugh, may I ask, to persevere in this matter ? There is yet time to draw back. Those blazing embers would destroy this letter in a few seconds. No eye but my own has seen it, and I would gladly forget that it had ever been written.”

“It *is* my deliberate intention to proceed with this matter,” said Frederica, in a low, clear voice.

“Then I have no alternative but to read the letter,” said Mr. Greenhough.

“Before you begin, I should like Mr. Penning to be present,” said Frederica.

Then when Mr. Penning, who had been waiting in an ante-room, was seated, and had been duly scrutinized by the assembled company, Mr. Greenhough proceeded to read the letter, which, as before stated, was simply an intimation that Miss Spencelaugh was prepared with certain evidence to dispute the right of Gaston to the title and estates of his father.

The Irish baronet took snuff nervously ; family disagreements were his especial abhorrence. The vicar looked very grave ; he could scarcely believe the evidence of his own ears. It sounded to him like the assertion of a lunatic to state that Gaston Spencelaugh, who had grown up among them all from childhood, was not his father's heir. And that such an assertion should emanate from Frederica, of all people in the world ! But that he had known her intimately for years, and had long recognized her as by far the cleverest and most able of the female coadjutors whom he had enlisted under his banner, he felt that he should really have had cause this morning to doubt her sanity. In such a case it was evidently his duty to remonstrate with her, and the vicar was a man who never shrank from a duty however unpleasant it might be. So he crossed the room, and leaned over her,

and spoke to her in a low voice. Frederica listened quietly to all he had to urge, but only shook her head when he had done, and laying her hand gently in his, said, "You are prejudging me. Wait till you shall have heard everything. Heaven knows, this task is not of my seeking. It has come to me unsought, and I should be doing foul wrong to the memory of the dead, and the rights of the living, were I to abandon it now." After this, the worthy vicar could only go back to his seat, wondering more and more.

Lady Spenceclough was sitting near the fire, with her face so far turned away from the company that nothing of it was visible but the profile. Gastou, chafing inwardly, was seated near her. What was all this bother about, he should like to know? Dispute his title, indeed! Was he not Sir Gaston Spenceclough, owner of Belair, and of all that fair landscape which could be seen through the windows stretching far into the dim distance? He had half a mind to ring the bell, and order Green to show these old fogies the door. It was high time they remembered who was master now. He was touched a little to think that Freddy, whom he had always liked and loved in his own careless fashion, should be turning against him at such a time with some trumped-up story of another heir. But he felt so secure in his new position that he could afford to let her have her fling, and then be magnanimous, and forgive her.

"The evidence of which you make mention in this letter," said Mr. Greenhough to Mr. Penning, "will be, I presume, forthcoming without difficulty?"

"We are prepared to go into the question at once," said Mr. Penning.

"Before entering into particulars," returned Mr. Greenhough, "you will, perhaps, furnish us with the name of the individual in whose favour these extraordinary proceedings are taken."

"Willingly. The gentleman to whom you allude is known, at present, as Mr. John English."

"I should like to ask this Mr John English a few questions. Oblige me by producing him."

"We are unable to do so just now," answered Mr. Penning, not without hesitation.

"Do you, in fact, know where this Mr. John English is living at the present time?" asked Mr. Greenhough.

"We certainly do not," answered the London man of law.

"Precisely so," said Mr. Greenhough, rubbing his hands with an air of satisfaction.—"Gentlemen," he added, turning to the baronet and the vicar, "from information received, as the detectives say, I am able to throw a little light upon the history of the individual in question. By occupation he is a wandering photographer, and in this capacity he seems to have knocked about the world for several years. Chance, or design, brought him at last to Normanford, and he had not been there many days before he obtained an introduction to Lady Spencelaugh, who, with her customary liberality and kindness of heart, at once gave him several commissions. The privilege of *entrée* to Belair which he thus obtained, he systematically abused, by ferreting out, from the domestics and others, all the information they could give him respecting the private history of the family, supplementing the same by further insidious inquiries among the old people of the neighbouring villages; till having, as he thought, picked up sufficient information to serve his vile purpose, he deliberately sat down and wrote out a Statement in which he claims to be heir to the title and estates of Belair. The whole affair would be no more than a piece of wretched absurdity, unworthy the attention of any sane man, were it not for the annoyance which, at a period of deep domestic affliction, it has caused a most estimable lady. But, gentlemen, the comedy, if I may call it such, is not yet played out. This individual, in consequence of an accident, is obliged to take up his residence for a while at Pevsey Bay, from which place he sends his Statement to Miss Spencelaugh, and is so far successful that he induces a lady of whose good sense and discernment I had hitherto had the highest opinion, to espouse his cause. But, gentlemen, the climax is yet to come. The very day after that on

which he sends his Statement to Miss Spenceclough, this man, this imposter as I ought rather to call him, disappears, and has never been heard of since. But shall I tell you why he disappears? Because he is afraid of being arrested and taken to task for previous attempts of a similar kind. Yes, gentlemen, the man himself has gone, no one knows whither—has neither been seen nor heard of for eight weeks; and yet we are seriously called upon to-day to test the validity of his ridiculous pretensions! The whole affair is really too absurd for belief." And Mr. Greenhough leaned back in his chair, and glanced at Mr. Penning with an air that seemed to say: "I think, my friend, your case has not a leg to stand on;" at the same time refreshing himself copiously from the baronet's box.

"Then I suppose we may consider this little unpleasantness as at an end?" said the vicar, with a genial smile.

"That's right; let's make everything pleasant," said the baronet, encouragingly.

"I beg, gentlemen, that you will not put us out of court in such a summary manner," said Mr. Penning, with a deprecatory smile. "What Mr. Greenhough has just urged sounds very plausible, I must admit; but, pray, remember that as yet you have only heard one side of the question. We at once confess that the disappearance of Mr. English is a circumstance for which we are unable to account, and one which, at the first glance, may seem to prejudice our case. But putting this fact for the moment on one side, I beg to state seriously and earnestly, on the part of Miss Spenceclough, that we are prepared with evidence which will go far to prove that many years ago, under this very roof, a heinous crime was perpetrated—by whom, we do not say—and a good man most foully deceived. And if right still be right, and wrong still be wrong, then does it most certainly rest with you two gentlemen, whom the dead master of this house appointed executors of his last will and testament, to do what he himself would have done, had he lived—to mete out, so far as in you lies, simple justice to the living and the dead."



"I really don't see," said Mr. Greenhough, with emphasis, "that in the absence of the chief—what shall I call him?—conspirator, we can proceed any further in this business. Let this Mr. English come forward in proper person, and we shall then be prepared to hear what he may have to say for himself."

Mr. Penning shrugged his shoulders. "Do you really wish to force us into a court of law?" he said. "Miss Spencelaugh thought, and I quite concurred with her, that it was advisable, in the first instance at least, to sift this affair, which deeply concerns the honour of an ancient and reputable family, before some tribunal of private friends; and not make a public scandal of it, unless after-circumstances should render such a course imperatively necessary."

"You are right, sir," said the vicar, with dignity. "In the position in which I and my colleague are placed by the will of the late Sir Philip Spencelaugh, we cannot do otherwise than lend an attentive hearing to what you may have to say; and either nip this matter in the bud, if it be based on a lie; or if it have truth for its foundation, see that justice be done to all whom it may affect. Before entering, however, upon any of your proofs, I wish to know, and I dare say my curiosity is shared by others, whom this Mr. John English asserts himself to be."

There was a general stir and movement in the room as the vicar ceased speaking. Lady Spencelaugh's cheek paled perceptibly, but she shaded her face with a hand-screen, and gazed more intently into the fire. Gaston unfolded his arms, and lifted himself for a moment out of the state of moody irritation into which he had fallen. Vague fears of some impending disaster were beginning to coil themselves round his heart. What was the meaning of this dark conspiracy which was gathering so ominously about him at the outset of his new career? The Irish baronet paused in the act of opening his snuff-box, to listen; and the vicar himself drew up closer to the table, and leaned forward with one hand to his ear.

Then Mr. Penning spoke. "Mr. John English," he said, "asserts himself to be the eldest son of the late Sir Philip Spencelaugh by his first marriage."

"But," said the vicar, recovering from his surprise, "the late baronet had only one son by his first marriage, Arthur by name, who died in infancy, and lies buried in the family vault."

"Mr. English asserts that *he* is the child in question," said Mr. Penning; "and if this be true, he is now Sir Arthur Spencelaugh, and the owner of Belair."

"Produce your proofs," said the vicar.

"Things are not looking so pleasant as they might do," thought the baronet. "I wish I was well out of this."

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## CHAPTER XXXIII.

### EVIDENCE FOR THE PROSECUTION.

"THE first evidence which I shall bring before you," said Mr. Penning, "is that of Jane Garrod—a woman of excellent character, and well known, I believe, to several persons present."

Jane Garrod was accordingly called. As the servant who had ushered her into the room was going out, Lady Spencelaugh said: "If Martha Winch is there, tell her to bring me my salts." Once in the room, Mrs. Winch took care not to leave it again. She sat down on a low stool behind Lady Spencelaugh, and was an attentive auditor of all that followed.

Jane curtseyed respectfully to Lady Spencelaugh, and to the assembled company; and then seated herself in the chair indicated by Mr. Penning, a short distance from the table. She was a firm-nerved woman, and neither her manner, nor her voice when she spoke, betrayed the slightest discomposure. After a few preliminary questions from Mr. Greenhough, she began her narrative as under:

"My name is Jane Garrod—and I shall have been married eighteen years come next Lady-day. My father was a small farmer a few miles from Normanford; but

he was too poor to keep all his children at home, and when I was old enough, I had to go out to service. A few years later, I was fortunate enough to be chosen as lady's-maid to Miss Honoria Barry, of Dean's Manor—close to where my father lived. Miss Honoria was just seventeen at that time, which was my own age. She was as beautiful as she was good; and it was impossible for any one to be near her without loving her. She took a liking to me, and was very kind to me, and treated me more like a humble friend than a paid servant. Wherever she and her papa went, I went with them; and we travelled about a good deal at different times, both in England and abroad. Miss Honoria had many friends and acquaintances, as was but natural to one in her position; but the friend that she loved above all others was Miss Eveleen Denner. They had been schoolgirls together, and now they were more like sisters than anything else, and far more devoted to each other than many sisters that I have known. Well, it so fell out, one Christmas, when Miss Eveleen was staying at Dean's Manor, that among other guests invited there for the holidays came Sir Arthur Spencelaugh of Belair—at that time a major in the army, and his cousin, Captain Philip Spencelaugh; both over from India on leave of absence. They had not been twenty-four hours at the Manor, before Sir Arthur was head over ears in love with Miss Honoria, and his cousin was as deeply smitten with the charms of Miss Eveleen. There were ardent lovers in those days; and before two months were over, the double wedding took place.

“My dear Miss Honoria was now Lady Spencelaugh, but that made no difference in her treatment of me; she was just as kind to me as she had always been. We lived here at Belair for eight quiet happy months, and then both Sir Arthur and his cousin were ordered back to India, in consequence of some frontier war that had just broken out. Well, nothing would serve the ladies but that they must go with their husbands; and I of course, must go with my dear mistress. When we reached Bombay, the war had been snuffed out, and our

soldiers were ordered to an up-country station, and we went with them. And so three or four years passed quietly and pleasantly away, marked with nothing in my memory beyond an occasional removal to a fresh station. But, after a time, Captain Spencelaugh's lady was confined of a son; and a little while afterwards my dear mistress brought her husband a sweet daughter—no other, in fact, than Miss Frederica here. We had just been celebrating baby's second birthday, when cholera of a very bad kind broke out at the station, and among its first victims were Sir Arthur Spencelaugh and his poor wife. They were well in the morning, and dead, both of them, at sunset; and they were buried under the walls of the fort at day-break next morning. The last words my dear mistress said, and they were all she had strength to say, were: 'Take care of baby;' and I promised her solemnly that, with Heaven's help, I would do so as far as in me lay. The captain's wife was away on a visit at the time, but the shock nearly killed her when she heard the news. As her health had been delicate for some time, the captain (now Sir Philip Spencelaugh, the late baronet's only child being a daughter) determined at once to send her back to England, together with his own child and his cousin's orphan girl. So we all went down to Bombay, and everything was got ready for the voyage. But misfortune still followed us; for on what was to have been the very last day of our stay, as Lady Spencelaugh was riding out, her horse shied suddenly, and threw her. Her leg was broken by the fall; and although everything was done for her that could be done, fever set in, and she was dead in less than a week. I thought for a time that Sir Philip would have gone crazy, but it takes a deal of grief to kill; and, besides, he had his little son to live for. So he got leave of absence, and we all came over to England together—the baronet, his son, little Miss Frederica, myself, and an ayah, or native nurse, who was in charge of the little motherless lad, under me. This ayah, who was never any favourite of mine, was sent back to India a few months after our

arrival, the climate of England being too cold for her. We came to Belair, and I and the children settled down here; but Sir Philip soon left us, and went to London, for his melancholy got the master of him in the country. At the end of about eighteen months, we heard that he was going to marry again; and presently he came down to Belair with his bride, the present Lady Spencelaugh. As it had happened after his first marriage, so it happened now; scarcely was the honeymoon over, when he was summoned back to India. This time, he went alone. A short time after Sir Philip had left England, Miss Frederica's health became delicate, and the doctors recommended change of air; so we went to Pevsey Bay, she and I, and were away for about six months. This was two or three months after Mr. Gaston was born. Lady Spencelaugh drove over every fortnight or so, to see how we were getting on; besides which, I had instructions to write to her Ladyship every few days, so that she might know how Miss Frederica's health was progressing. It was while we were staying at Pevsey Bay that news came to us of Master Arthur's illness and death; and I remember as if it was only yesterday, our mourning things being sent over by the Normanford carrier. After we got back home, the first place Miss Frederica and I went to was Belair church, to see the marble tablet which had been put up to the memory of the dead child. I stayed with Miss Frederica a year or two longer, till she was taken out of my hands, and put under the care of a governess; and I was then free to marry, for I had been engaged many years, and Abel Garrod, my present husband that is, was getting tired of waiting."

"A very interesting piece of family history," said Mr. Greenhough, testily, as Jane paused for a moment; "but really, I don't see in what way it bears upon the case now under consideration."

"Mrs. Garrod, I believe, has not quite finished yet," said Mr. Penning, drily.

Mr. Greenhough shrugged his shoulders, glanced at his watch, and began to bite his quill viciously.

“ Captain Spencelaugh—that is, the late Sir Philip ”—resumed Jane, “ on his visits to Dean’s Manor, was sometimes accompanied by a younger brother, named Reginald, who had been brought up to be a barrister, but who afterwards went out to Canada, and died there a few years later. I saw Mr. Reginald many different times, and had often occasion to speak to him, and have had presents from him, so that I could not possibly be mistaken as to his appearance. One evening last autumn, as I was walking through the waiting-room at Kingsthorpe station, I certainly thought that I saw his ghost facing me. I was quite scared, so striking was the likeness between the man I saw before me and my late master’s youngest brother. I never thought of asking who the stranger was, but set it down as a mere chance likeness, and forgot all about it after a few days ; that is, I forgot all about it till I saw the stranger again. The next time I saw him was when he was brought to my door by the Kingsthorpe carrier, who had found him lying wounded and insensible in the high-road. I recognized him again in an instant as the stranger I had seen for a moment one evening, about two months before. But, gentlemen, I should quite fail in expressing to you what I felt when the doctor, on stripping the wounded man’s shoulder to examine his hurt, pointed out to me a strange mark on that shoulder, exactly similar to the mark which I knew to have been on the shoulder of Master Arthur, who had died twenty years before. There it certainly was, line for line, as I so well remembered it.

“ I have already said that we brought an ayah with us from India, who had charge of Master Arthur, under me, and who was sent back home after a very short stay in England. This woman was passionately fond of the boy, and before she left Belair, while I was away for a few days burying my mother, she contrived, by some means best known to herself, to mark him on the left shoulder with the figure of a coiled snake, holding a lotos-flower in its mouth, done in faint blue lines, which nothing could ever rub out. I was sorely vexed when I

got to know about it ; and I scolded the woman rarely ; but you see it was done, and couldn't be undone. I mentioned it privately to Lady Spencelaugh, but I never spoke of it to Sir Philip—I was afraid of his anger. Both the lotos and the snake, as you gentlemen are perhaps aware, are sacred symbols among the Hindoos ; and the ayah said the mark was a charm which would carry the child safely through many dangers, and that would bring him back to life when everybody thought him dead. Of course, I set no store by her gibberish ; but I must say, I was startled when I saw on the shoulder of Mr. John English an exact counterpart of the mark which I knew to have been on the shoulder of Master Arthur Spencelaugh, dead twenty years before. And I think, gentlemen, that is all I have to say at present."

"And quite enough, too," muttered Mr. Greenhough.

The vicar had been taking copious notes ; and the baronet had tried to follow his example, but had got the tail of one sentence so inextricably mixed up with the beginning of another, that, after several vain efforts to make some sense of what he had already written, he gave up the task in despair. Said the lawyer to the vicar ; "You do not, I hope, my dear sir, attach much importance to the evidence of this woman ?"

"Not much, certainly, as the case stands at present," returned the vicar. "Her evidence seems to rest on nothing stronger than one of those coincidences which are by no means so infrequent in real life as some people imagine. Still, I believe Jane Garrod to be a strictly honest woman ; one who would speak the truth conscientiously, as far as she knows it"

"Just so—as far as she knows it," said the lawyer, drily. "Half truths are dangerous things to handle."

"Well, let us proceed a little further, and see what more we can elicit," said the vicar. "Who is your next witness, Mr. Penning ?"

"What I propose to do next," said Mr. Penning, "is to read to you the evidence of one James Billings, formerly a footman at Belair, afterwards transported for

burglary, and now just released from Portland, after serving out a second sentence."

"Oh, ho!" said Mr. Greenhough, grimly. "Pretty company you are introducing us to! I wonder what value any jury would attach to the evidence of such a double-dyed scoundrel. But why is not the fellow himself here?"

"I did not think it necessary to produce him in person on such an occasion as this," said Mr. Penning. "I can, however, have him here for you by to-morrow morning, if you wish it. Meanwhile, I will, with your permission, read this statement, which has been drawn up by Billings himself without any assistance."

"Pray proceed, sir," said the vicar; whereupon Mr. Penning read as under:

"According to promise made and given, I, James Billings, otherwise known as "Jim the Downy," now proceed to put down on paper some Recollections of my Early Life.

"To begin at the beginning. You know already that I was footman at Belair, but you don't know how I came to fill that situation; and I must add a few words of explanation, so that you may understand better what follows. My father was a well-known begging-letter writer, which accounts for my education; and all my family were more or less mixed up with the profession. But my governor got lagged at last, and my two brothers came to grief in another way; and I got such a sickening of the whole business, that I determined to try what honesty would do towards making my fortune. Not to bother you with what you wouldn't care to hear about, I got a footman's place at last; and two or three years later, I went into the service of Lady Spencelaugh on her marriage; and so, in course of time, found myself at Belair. I liked a footman's life well enough for some things—there was no hard work to do, and plenty of time for reading the newspapers; but, on the other hand, I seemed as far as ever from making my fortune. It was about this time that I fell in with Nance Fennell, who was living with her



mother at White Grange, and I used to go there to see her as often as I could find time.

“I ought to have told you that one of my sisters was married to Charley Wing, a noted cracksmen, or housebreaker. Charley often professed to be sorry that I had taken to such a duffing way of getting a living; and said that a young fellow of my abilities, with proper instruction, might have done something splendid in his own line; and would often invite me to join him. One day Charley met me, and said: “Your people often go to Sedgeley Court, and you go with them?” “Yes,” said I. “Well,” said he, “me and my pal, Bill Stuckley, have got a plant on there. There’s no end of plate in the house; and just at this time of the year, while they are having so much company, the old dowager keeps all her diamonds at home. Now, I want you, next time you go there, to make me a careful plan of the house, and to ascertain all you can about the position and strength of the plate-chest. If the crack comes off all right, you shall have a fair share of the swag, and then you can marry that girl that you are so sweet on, and hook it to Australia.” I took the bait after awhile, and agreed to do as he wanted. Perhaps Charley would have wanted to crack Belair, only he knew from me that while Sir Philip was away in India, all the family plate was kept at the banker’s.

“At this time there was living at Belair, Lady Spencelaugh and her baby son; Master Arthur Spencelaugh, the baronet’s son by his first marriage, a lad about five years old; and Miss Frederica Spencelaugh, the daughter of the last baronet, both of whose parents had died in India. After a time, Miss Frederica was sent away with her nurse to some seaside place for the good of her health; and a few weeks after that, it was reported among us servants downstairs that Master Arthur was lying very ill upstairs of some catching fever; and orders were given that nobody was to go near the room except the doctor, and the woman who had volunteered to nurse him. This woman was a Mrs. Winch, the landlady of the “Hand and Dagger”

at Normanford, and my Lady's confidante in everything (it seems they had known one another when girls); and everybody said it was very good of her to run the risk. The doctor who saw the boy was Mrs. Winch's brother, his name was Kreefe—a lame, squint-eyed man, and not one of your swell doctors by any means. Well, Master Arthur got worse and worse, and in a few days he died—at least we were told so; and so particular was Mrs. Winch that nobody should run the risk of catching the fever but herself, that when the undertaker's men brought the coffin, she made them leave it outside the room, and said she would do the rest herself. So we were all put into black, and there was a quiet funeral one morning; and everybody thought they had seen the last of poor Master Arthur.

“On the second night after the funeral, I had an engagement to meet Crack Charley at twelve o'clock in the east plantation. We kept early hours at Belair; and at that time of night, I was obliged to let myself out and in again unknown to anybody; but that wasn't difficult to manage. I had seen Charley, and was coming back along the gravelled path that runs round the east wing of the Hall, when what should I hear but a child's thin voice, that sounded close by me, but whether above or below, I couldn't tell, crying: “Help—help! Please ask them to let me out.” I looked round, but could see nobody, and my blood ran cold all over me. I called out: “Who the d—— are you? and what place do you want to be let out of?” “I am Master Arthur,” said the child's voice, “and I have been shut up here ever such a long time. Oh, do please beg of them to let me out!” I swear you might have knocked me down with a sneeze when I heard these words. I had watched this lad's funeral only a few hours before, yet here he was, still alive, and speaking to me! With a good deal of bother, I made out where he was; and then I got one of the gardener's ladders, and planting it against the wall, which just there is thickly covered with ivy, I climbed up it, and so found the spot where the voice came from. It was a long,

narrow slit in the thick wall of what is the oldest part of the Hall, lighting a small room, which no doubt had often been used as a hiding-place in the old troubled times. This opening, as I afterwards found, was entirely hidden from the outside by a thick curtain of ivy. "Who shut you up here, Master Arthur?" I said, speaking to him through the slit in the wall. "My Lady, and that woman with the cat's eyes," he said—meaning Mrs. Winch. "How long have you been here?" I asked. "I don't know how long, because I always feel so sleepy here; but a very long time," he said. "That's you, Billings, is it not? I know your voice. Will you please to shake hands with me?" I squeezed my hand into the slit as far as I could, and then I felt his cold little fingers grasp mine. "Thank you," he said, in his sweet, melancholy way, as he let go my hand again; and I had a very queer feeling round my heart for some minutes afterwards. I talked to him a little while longer; then he said: "I think I must get down now, Billings—I am standing on two chairs placed on the table—as I am getting very sleepy again, and I might fall, you know. You will ask them to let me out, will you not? Good-night, and God bless you, Billings!"

"On my soul, I don't like to put it down! but I betrayed my promise to that child, and never mentioned to anyone what I had seen and heard. I have done many a rascally trick in my time, but that was the wickedest of them all. Instead of doing what I ought to have done, I said to myself: "My Lady has got a little private game of her own on here. If I can only make myself master of it, she will pay me well to keep the secret." So I determined to keep my eyes open. I had not long to watch, for the very next night, about 11 P.M., a little covered cart, driven by Kreefe—came up to one of the side-doors; and presently Mrs. Winch came out, carrying the child in her arms, fast asleep. She got into the cart with him; the cover was tied down, and the doctor drove off with his load. I heard them say something about White Grange, so I stole

away by a near footpath across the moors, and was there, hidden in the thick thorn-tree that grows just inside the boundary-wall, when Kreefe drove up to the door. Old Job Sandyson came out with a lantern, and himself carried the lad, still asleep, into the house; and there he was hidden away for six weeks in one of the top rooms of White Grange. Nance Fennell told me all about it afterwards. At the end of that time, Mrs. Winch and the doctor went one night to White Grange with the same little covered cart, and took the lad away; and as to what became of him afterwards, I know nothing, only Nance said that she happened to overhear that they were going to Liverpool. But I do happen to know that just at that very time Kreefe and his wife left Normanford; and it was given out that they had gone to America.

“Well, I thought after this that I had got a clear case against my Lady, such a one as ought to bring me in something handsome; and so it would have done, had not other things turned out badly. Sedgeley Court was safely cracked, and I got my share of the plunder. But unfortunately, the police got hold of Bill Stuckley for it, and he peached when in prison; besides which, my plan of the house was found on him; so one fine morning, he, and I, and Charley had the pleasure of hearing that we were to be sent on our travels into foreign parts for several years to come. Before sailing, I sent a message to Lady Spencelaugh, telling her I wanted to see her on important business; but either she never got the message, or else she wouldn't come. But the secret was one that would keep, and I determined to keep it till I got back home. At the end of ten years, I found myself in the old country again, hard up. I had made up my mind that as soon as I got the means, I would run down to Belair, and pay my Lady a visit. Before I could do this, however, I fell in with an old friend of Charley's, and was persuaded to join him in a little affair, for which we both got into trouble; and the rest you know.

“And now you have got the whole boiling out of

me; and my opinion is, that I'm a cursed fool for my pains. I ain't a superstitious cove, but I can't help thinking that if I had acted square by the lad, as I promised him, things might have gone more square with me. But what can't be cured must be endured. One thing I do know—that writing is deuced dry work; so, now that this job is well out of hand, I'm dead nuts on to a tumbler of old rum, and a pipe of choice negro-head.

“‘Yours to command,

“‘JIM BILLINGS.

“‘P.S.—I haven't bothered you with any dates in my letter, but I can give you them all, as pat as ninepence, whenever you may want them.’”

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## CHAPTER XXXIV.

### MR. PENNING'S PROPOSITION.

“A VERY characteristic production!” said Mr. Greenhough, as Mr. Penning finished reading the ex-convict's statement. “Mr. James Billings' old skill as a begging-letter impostor has stood him in good stead in that ingenious piece of composition. Faugh! The whole narrative is redolent of the Old Bailey!”

The baronet chuckled, and then instantly became grave again, as though he had been caught in some dereliction of duty. The vicar, too, looked very grave, and was conning his notes seriously. Mr. Greenhough had a strong opinion of the vicar's clear good sense, and he felt vaguely uneasy at the expression of that gentleman's face; for the lawyer himself was quite serious in believing that the whole affair was nothing more than an ingenious conspiracy got up to defraud the rightful heir.

Lady Spencelaugh said no word, but sat quite still, with one hand clasped in that of her faithful friend, Martha Winch; and with her eyes bent mostly on Gaston—that son for whose sake she had risked so much. Gaston himself sat biting his nails moodily. The olive of his cheek had paled somewhat during the

last half-hour Title, houses, and lands seemed to be slipping from under his feet in some incomprehensible way, just at the moment when he had begun to realise the fact of their being all his own. If he were not Sir Gaston Spencelaugh, the richest baronet in all Monks-shire, what would become of him, by Jove! with that threatening array of bills, and duns, and post-obits hemming him in, and stopping up every avenue of escape; and ready to swoop down upon him the moment his misfortune should get wind, and crush him remorselessly, as by the *peine forte et dure*! He would shoot himself, by Jove! that's what he would do—it was the most gentlemanly mode of writing *Finis* to one's *Memoirs*—and give them all the slip that way.

“What further evidence have you to offer in support of this extraordinary charge?” said the vicar, at last, breaking a silence that was becoming oppressive to every one.

The next evidence put in by Mr. Penning was that of Margaret Fennell, at present a resident in Grellier's Almshouses; who deposed, that in a certain month of a certain year, Martha Winch, and her brother, Jeremiah Kreefe, took to the house known as White Grange a boy, apparently about five years of age. That the said child, after being kept locked up at White Grange for the space of six weeks, was taken away one evening after dark by the two before-named persons, and never seen by her, Margaret Fennell, afterwards.

Mr. Penning next brought forward the evidence of Mr. Edwin, ex-master of the Foundation School at Normanford; who deposed to having been at Liverpool on a certain day of a certain year, and to there seeing Dr. Kreefe, his wife, and Mrs. Winch, accompanied by a boy, apparently about five years old, alight from a cab at one of the docks. Mr. Edwin further deposed to seeing Mrs. Winch bid farewell to her brother and his wife; and to seeing the two latter, accompanied by the child, go on board a vessel named the *Lone Star*, which vessel, as he found from after-inquiry, was advertised to sail for New York at high-water that very day.

The next piece of evidence put in by Mr. Penning was the Statement written by John English at Pevsey Bay, and sent by him to Miss Spencelaugh. Mr. Penning read this Statement aloud, as he had done the previous evidence. In it, as may be remembered, John English spoke of his early life in America with the Kreefes; and how the lame doctor had at last contrived to get rid of him. He mentioned his recognition of the doctor's portrait at the "Hand and Dagger;" and how he became acquainted with the contents of the note intended for Lady Spencelaugh; he told of his sudden dismissal from Belair the day after Mrs. Winch's return to Normanford; together with various other minor matters, some of which had been brought out more strongly in the previous evidence, but all tending to establish the truth of his story.

"This concludes our case as it stands at present," said Mr. Penning, as he refolded John's manuscript.

"In the absence of Mr. English, as I must still continue to call him," said the vicar, "I really don't see what further steps can possibly be taken in the affair. But, perhaps, Lady Spencelaugh may have something to say to all this?"

Mr. Greenhough was whispering earnestly with my Lady and Mrs. Winch, and presently he came forward, and addressing the vicar and the baronet, said: "Lady Spencelaugh desires me to deny most emphatically the truth of the allegations contained in the statements just read to you by Mr. Penning, so far as they affect her Ladyship. The evidence of the convict Billings she states to be without the shadow of a foundation in fact—at least that portion of it which relates to the late Master Arthur Spencelaugh: whether the rest of it be true or false, is a matter of no moment. Mrs. Winch, the respected landlady of the "Hand and Dagger," is quite willing to admit that there was a child taken to White Grange by herself and brother, and that the same child was afterwards taken by Dr. Kreefe to America. But that the child in question was Master Arthur Spencelaugh, she most positively denies. At the proper

time and place, Mrs. Winch will be prepared to prove who the child really was, and to explain why it was found necessary to get him out of the country in such a surreptitious manner. For the rest, until this Mr. English turns up, and proves his own case more completely, and to better purpose, than his advocates have done for him, we shall sit down contented with the nine points of the law which we have in our favour. We don't think that this Mr. English ever will turn up in this neighbourhood again. We believe him to have been wise in his generation, and to have 'made tracks,' as the Yankees say. Should he, however, have the rare impudence ever to show his face in this part of the country again, we are quite prepared to have him arrested as a common impostor. Six months' oakum-picking would, I opine, go far towards checking his ambitious proclivities for the future. I may add that Lady Spencelaugh cannot but feel intensely grieved that anyone for whom she has felt so warm an affection as she has for Miss Spencelaugh, should have taken a course so unwarranted, so opposed to sense and good-feeling." Here Mr. Greenhough caught the vicar's eye fixed on him, and there was something in it which told him he had better stop. "But the subject is a painful one, and I refrain from adding more," he said, and then sat down.

Mr. Penning rose. "We are not here to bandy accusations," he said, "but to set right, as far as in us lies, a great apparent wrong. As stated by me before, I am quite at a loss how to account for the absence of Mr. English; but I have no doubt that when that gentleman does return, he will be able to furnish a satisfactory explanation of what at present seems so inexplicable. It is easy to call any man an impostor; but in the present case the term is a simple absurdity, as no one knows better than Mr. Greenhough himself. The facts which have been laid before you to-day having come to Miss Spencelaugh's knowledge, too late, I am sorry to say, for Sir Philip to be made acquainted with them, Miss Spencelaugh felt that this occasion, more than any



other, was the one on which she ought to relieve herself of a responsibility which she was no longer prepared to carry alone. On you, reverend sir, and on your colleague, as executors under the will of the late lamented head of this family, that responsibility must now devolve; and in the absence of the person chiefly concerned, it will rest with you to decide, from what you have heard, as to what steps, if any, you may deem it requisite to take in the present contingency. Whatever decision you may arrive at, Miss Spencelaugh will abide by; but to say, as my legal friend has said, that the lady in question ought to have kept back the evidence which you have heard this morning, is equivalent to saying that she ought to have made herself accessory after the fact to what, if our case be a genuine one, is one of the most base and cruel conspiracies that ever came within the range of my experience. I say this without the slightest imputation on any person or persons here present. We can, however, go one step further in this extraordinary business, and one only. But that step, if you are willing to sanction it, may prove a most important one in testing the value of the evidence which has been brought before you to-day—that evidence which my legal friend has denounced as a wholesale piece of imposture. Gentlemen, *we can open the coffin which is said to contain the body of Master Arthur Spencelaugh.*”

At these ominous words, a low cry of agony burst irrepressibly from the lips of Lady Spencelaugh, and a deathlike whiteness overspread her face. Gaston, thinking she was about to faint, sprang to her side; but she waved him impatiently away, and straightened herself presently, and summoned back a little colour to her cheeks, as though she were afraid lest any should see how powerfully Mr. Penning’s last words had affected her. They had taken every one in the room by surprise. Mr. Greenhough was fairly puzzled. His scepticism was beginning to be shaken in spite of himself. Up to this moment, he had really looked upon the whole affair as a cleverly concocted conspiracy; but his observant

eye had not failed to note Lady Spencelaugh's evident agitation; and the audacity of Mr. Penning's proposition almost took his breath away.

Mr. Penning resumed. "You, Sir Michael, are, I believe, a county magistrate; and, unless I mistake, you, reverend sir, are vicar of the parish in which the church of Belair is situate; besides which, the family vault is private property. As the executors of the late baronet, you have therefore, I opine, full power in that capacity to act as I have indicated, should you think well to do so."

"Really, Mr. Penning," said the vicar, "this proposition of yours is a most extraordinary one, and one which I and my colleague are not prepared to accept without serious consideration. But, in any case, we certainly could not think of proceeding in such a matter without the concurrence of Sir Gaston Spencelaugh, whom, notwithstanding all that has been said this morning, I must still look upon as the head of the family, and the owner of Belair."

"It would be rank sacrilege!" exclaimed Lady Spencelaugh, addressing herself to the company for the first time that day. All present were struck by the change in her voice, ordinarily so low, honeyed, and courteous, now so husky, and with an ill-concealed anxiety in its tones.—"Gaston, my dear boy, you must not allow this thing to take place. Your father's bones will rise up in judgment against you if you do! No—no—for my sake, you must not allow it!"

"What have we to fear, mother?" said Gaston, his pale, olive face looking more haggard than ever, and his under-lip twitching nervously as he spoke. "You have already stated, or rather, Mr. Greenhough has for you, that the evidence we have heard this morning is a tissue of falsehoods, as far as you are concerned. Do you still adhere to that assertion?"

"I do, I do!" said the miserable woman, eagerly. "All lies, Gaston dear, as far as I am concerned."

"In that case, mother, we have nothing to be afraid of," said Gaston. "To open my poor brother's coffin,

under such circumstances, cannot be any sacrilege. Gentlemen," he added, coming forward to the table, "whatever permission you require from me in this case, I grant freely and fully. Act as seems best to your own judgment. For my mother and myself, I state emphatically that instead of shunning inquiry, we court it. Let your perquisition be as searching as possible; we have no fear as to the result."

"But Gaston, Gaston!" implored Lady Spencelaugh, in a tone of agony, "I tell you this must not be allowed! Oh, it is horrible! For my sake, Gaston, you must not allow this!"

"Mother, in such a case as this it is necessary," said Gaston, firmly. "The permission I have given I cannot retract. Besides, such a proof will go far to show the utter worthlessness of this base scheme of imposture. Come; take my arm. For the present, our business here is at an end."

She gave one look into his face, and then seeing that his resolve was not to be shaken, with a low, bitter sigh, she took his arm, and allowed herself to be led from the room, Mrs. Winch following meekly.

After a long consultation with Sir Michael, the vicar announced that Mr. Penning's proposition would be acceded to; and appointed the hour of six that evening as the time for the gentlemen there present to meet at the church.

To Frederica the day had seemed a long and terrible one. She thanked Heaven fervently that it was over at last, and that the weight of the dark secret which she had carried about with her for so long a time would rest on her feeble shoulders no more.

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## CHAPTER XXXV

### THE FAMILY VAULT.

THE vestry of the little church of Belair was a chilly and desolate-looking room, with its flagged floor and whitewashed walls; with its straight-backed oaken

chairs, and its little iron-barred window ; and not all the efforts of the rheumatic old sexton, who had lighted it up with a couple of wax-candles and a sputtering fire of damp wood, could make it seem even tolerably cheerful. Hardly had six o'clock done striking, when the vicar and Sir Michael arrived. Five minutes later came Mr. Greenhough and Mr. Penning, thickly powdered with snow-flakes, they having walked down together, arm-in-arm, from the Hall. When all were assembled, the vicar opened a private cupboard, and silently poured out four glasses of the excellent port of which a small supply was always kept in stock ; and in silence it was discussed.

"I named the hour of six as that for our meeting here," said the vicar, "because I thought that what we are about to do had better be done under the friendly shade of darkness. Whatever may be the result of our visit here this evening, we need not take the public into our confidence, unless after-circumstances should compel us to do so. Jenkins, the sexton, is discretion itself ; and the position of this church is so solitary, that I hardly think it likely that we shall be observed by any inquisitive busybodies from the outside. And now, gentlemen, if you are ready, we will proceed to business."

Jenkins being summoned, produced a huge horn lantern, which he proceeded to light up with one of the wax-candles. Then taking a large key from its nail on the wall, he led the way out of the church ; and so by a narrow gravelled path round one corner of the edifice, to a spot where an iron door let into the wall, with a grating above it, and reached by a descent of three or four steps, indicated the entrance to the family vault of the Spencelaughs. The old man turned the creaking key, and pushed back the heavy door. Contrasted against the whiteness outside, for the snow-flakes were still falling steadily, the entrance to the vault looked like the black cavernous vestibule to some old-world dungeon, some place of torture and imprisonment in years long past. Stopping for a moment to indulge in what might be appropriately termed a churchyard cough, the old sexton picked up his lantern again, and

went slowly in, followed, one by one, by the others. If the atmosphere had seemed cold and marrow-chilling in the room above, it was twice as cold and marrow-chilling in this cavern of dead people. Ranged on the marble slabs which ran round three sides of the vault were the black coffins of several generations of dead and gone Spencelaughs; all with a terrible sameness about them, seen by that dim light, as though they were merely the multiplied coffins of one dead person who loved a frequent change of domicile. Ah, no! some three or four of them were those of children—blossoms plucked at their sweetest, while somewhat of Heaven's dew still lingered upon them.

Although so few hours had passed since the funeral of Sir Philip, all traces of that ceremony had already been removed. The great flag over the centre of the vault had been put back into its place, and the baronet had found a last home on the slab appointed for him. A hushed and solemn feeling crept over the hearts of the four visitors as they gazed around. In the reverent presence of the dead, all heads were uncovered.

"This, sir, is the coffin you want to examine," said the sexton, in dry creaking tones, as though the hinges of his voice were in want of oiling. "This is Master Arthur's coffin."

And with that his old arms encircled a child's coffin, and lifted it on to the black marble table which stood in the centre of the vault. As he did so, a wreath of yellow everlasting slipped off it, and fell to the ground.

"The poor child was not quite forgotten," said the vicar, as he picked up the wreath.—"By whom was this token placed here, Jenkins?"

"By Miss Frederica, sir. Every eighteenth of October—that was the day Master Arthur died—she comes and puts a fresh wreath on his coffin. She has never once missed doing it all these years. You see, sir, she and Master Arthur were playfellows when they were children together, and very fond of one another. Lord! I remember them both coming hand-in-hand to church, as if it was only t'other day.—Master Arthur died when

Miss Freddy was away from home; and the first time she came here after she got back, I thought the pretty darling's heart would have broke. However, she got over it in time; but every year since then, she has brought a wreath like what you see, and put it with her own hands on the collin, and said a little prayer to herself, and then gone quietly away."

"You have usually a good memory for such things," said the vicar: "tell me, do you remember the funeral of Master Arthur Spencelaugh?"

"That I do, sir," said the old man, eagerly. "I recollect it as well as if it had happened only yesterday; and a shabby funeral it were, though it's I that say so. Sir Philip was away in India at that time, and Lady Spencelaugh was too ill to come; so there was just nobody to see the last of the poor lad but that lame and ugly Dr. Kreefe, and a couple of undertaker's men. Mr. Rolfe, he were curate here at that time, and a fast reader he was surely. He soon gabbled through the Service; and they all seemed glad to hurry the poor little chap out of sight. Before Sir Philip came home, there was a pretty white tablet to the memory of Master Arthur put up by my Lady, just over the family pew; and many a time has Sir Philip come here by himself to read what there is written on it about his boy; and sometimes he would say: 'It was a sad day's work for me, Jenkins, when my poor Arthur died.'"

The old man paused, more from lack of breath than want of words. It might be nothing more than fancy, but to every one there it seemed as if the light shed by the lantern was slowly growing dimmer and less able to pierce the gloom of the vault, which seemed to hold within its chill precincts the concentrated darkness of many years—a darkness that thickened the air, and was infinitely more intense than the blackness of the blackest night in the churchyard without.

"Eh, sirs! but it's a poor light to work by," said Jenkins. So saying, he opened the door of the lantern, and took out the candle to snuff it. But as he did so, a sudden gust of mingled wind and snow burst through

the grating over the iron door, and extinguished the light, and sweeping through the vault, rushed out again by the way it had come; and as it did so, it seemed to the excited fancy of more than one there present as though the silent people lying so near them turned over in their resting-places, and whispered uneasily among themselves.

Jenkins was the only one entirely unmoved by this little accident. The old sexton was as much at home among dead people as though he were smoking his pipe in his own chimney-corner; and he probably felt a sort of kindly contempt for such of them as rested humbly in the churchyard, as a class of individuals who had a weakness for intruding their bones on the notice of survivors. He now proceeded deliberately to strike a match on the sole of his boot, and to re-light the candle, muttering something to himself meanwhile about its being pleasant, seasonable weather.

"Am I to begin, sir?" he said to the vicar, when he had put the candle out of the way of a similar accident. "I have got my screw-driver here ready."

"One cannot help feeling somewhat reluctant to intrude upon the sacred repose of the dead," said the vicar, addressing his companions. "But in an exceptional case like the present one, where the truth cannot be arrived at by ordinary means, I think we may consider that we are fully justified in taking such a step.—Jenkins, you may begin."

Jenkins whipped the screw-driver nimbly out of his pocket, and then proceeded to rub his nose with it appreciatively, while regarding the coffin with a critical eye: evidently he had a ghastly sort of relish for the task before him.

"My nipper, gentlemen, don't seem inclined to bite," said Jenkins, speaking thus of the nail. But at last the nipper did bite, yielding slowly and grudgingly to the force of the implement. "A famous fellow!" said the old man, holding up the nail between his thumb and finger. "One of Death's double-teeth—he, he!"

All present turned suddenly. They felt, by the quick

leen rush of snow-laden air, that the iron door was being opened by some one from the outside. They turned, to see a black, snow-sprinkled figure, half standing, half crouching, at the entrance to the vault. It was a woman's figure; but the face was hidden, in part by the black hood drawn closely over the head, and in part by the white delicate hands.

"Oh, not too late! say that I am not too late!" It was Lady Spencelaugh's voice, but strangely altered. She staggered forward as she spoke, like one suddenly struck blind, till she stood by the table in the centre of the vault on which rested the little coffin. Do not touch *that!*" she exclaimed. "It contains not what you seek—what it does contain matters not. I confess everything. Arthur Spencelaugh did not die. I sent him away to White Grange, from which place he was taken to America by the Kreefes. I wanted the title and estates for my own son. I have carried the wretched secret about with me for twenty years, only to have it wrenched from me at the moment the reward seemed in my grasp. Pardon me—pity me, if you will: I care not: I only ask to die—to die—to die!"

As the last words came almost inaudibly from her lips, she sank in a dead faint on the floor of the vault. Mr. Greenhough ran to support her; and then, with the assistance of the other gentlemen, she was carried out, and through the churchyard, and into the vestry. Scarcely had they got there with their burden, when Mrs. Winch made her appearance. That faithful retainer, having left Lady Spencelaugh for a few minutes, and missing her when she returned, had divined, as by instinct, whither her Ladyship had gone, and had at once hurried after her. Finding, after a time, that Lady Spencelaugh showed signs of returning consciousness, the gentlemen left her to the care of the landlady, with a promise to send a carriage down from the Hall.

As Mr. Greenhough and Mr. Penning walked back through the snowy park, said the former: "Even if all this be true that we have just heard, it by no means proves that your man is the genuine Simon Pure."



Mr. Penning smiled a little loftily. "We shall see what we shall see," he said, with the air of an oracle; and with that, as by mutual consent, the affair was put on one side for the morrow's settlement; and Greenhough related a capital story of a hanging judge, which Penning capped with "a good thing, sir, told me by Dawkins, Q.C."

"Cheer up, my Lady," whispered Mrs. Winch reassuringly in the ear of the prostrate woman, whose head lay on her shoulder. "All is not lost, even after what you have told them. The game is still our own. Remember the words of the telegram: 'The *Ocean Child* has foundered with all on board.' Nothing can keep Mr. Gaston out of the title and the estates; and, for his sake, what you have said to-night will be hushed up and forgotten."

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## CHAPTER XXXVI.

### WAITING FOR JERRY.

THE clock had just struck nine on the evening of the day which had witnessed such strange events at Belair, and Gurney Brackenridge was sitting at home in slippered ease, concocting for himself a tumbler of his favourite beverage. He was alone in the house, for Hannah had got a few days' holiday to visit some friends, and the chemist's domestic comforts were looked after by Mrs. Jakeway in the interim.

The world had prospered somewhat with Gurney Brackenridge since we saw him last. Although he had never received the three hundred pounds which had been promised him in case he should succeed in a certain service, which, as events turned out, it had been found impossible to perform, he had yet been handsomely paid for his trouble in other ways, and especially for the neat, detective-like style in which he had tracked John English from Pevsey Bay to a berth on board the *Ocean Child*, fast clipper-ship, bound for New York. Then, again, it was satisfactory to know that the widow's long-standing promise to marry him was likely at last

to have a speedy fulfilment. Mrs. Winch had been in strangely good spirits ever since the receipt of his telegram containing the news of the loss of the *Ocean Child*, which had foundered a few days after leaving the Mersey, and while Brackenridge was still in Liverpool. The first of May had been fixed for the forthcoming nuptials; and, all things considered, the chemist ought to have been, if not in a happy, at least in a contented frame of mind. But such was by no means the case. The old sore was still festering secretly, and he refused to let it heal. He felt himself to be an ill-used and aggrieved individual, because his future wife still persisted in her resolution not to enlighten him as to the nature of the secret bond which held her and Lady Spencelaugh so firmly together, and mixed up the interests of both so inexplicably with those of John English. Not only did the widow refuse to enlighten him now, but she gave him, besides, distinctly to understand that even after marriage, the secret would remain, as heretofore, her own property, and be in nowise shared by him; and he was too well acquainted with the resolute character of Martha Winch not to feel certain that she would keep her word in this respect in spite of all that he might say or do. Therefore did Gurney Brackenridge brood darkly over the slight which, as he conceived, was put upon him. Besides, how utterly and inconceivably foolish on the part of any one in possession of a secret affecting the happiness and welfare of another, and that other a person high up in the social scale, one who could well afford to pay for the keeping of it, to allow such a golden chance to slip, when it might be had for the mere grasping! It was not the chemist's style of doing business. To him, it would have been as a little gold-mine; as a perennial source of income; bringing with it possibilities of unlimited cessation from work, with French brandy in unstinted quantity, and an exciting life in London or Paris.

His dark reverie was suddenly put to flight by the familiar click of the garden-gate, followed next minute by a loud double-knock at the front door. "That's

Jerry's knock, I'll wager anything. What can the fool want with me to-night?"

He got up, and opened the door with a cordial greeting, for he always made a point of keeping in Jerry's good graces. "What has brought you here, my man, at this time of the night?" said Brackenridge, as Jerry sat down bashfully on the proffered chair, while his bright eyes roved purposelessly about the little room.

"Jerry has just come from Belair," said the lad. "He has got to post a letter for my lady; and he was to leave another here on the way.—There were five black crows sitting all of a row as Jerry went through the park this afternoon: that means that something bad is going to happen to somebody."

The chemist held out his hand impatiently for the letter, and Jerry, after a little fumbling, produced it. Brackenridge at once recognized the widow's writing. He tore it open, and read as under:

"DEAR GURNEY,—I have been up at Belair all day, and am just going home, very tired, and far from well. I send you this by Jerry, to save you the trouble of walking down to-night, as I shall at once go to bed on reaching home. Look in, however, in the morning, as you go to business. Sincerely yours, M. W."

"I might have known better," murmured the chemist bitterly to himself as he refolded the note, "than to think that she would let out anything of importance to me."

He paused for a moment, with the letter still between his fingers. What was it that Jerry had said? That he was taking to the post a letter written by Lady Spencelaugh! Any letter written by Lady Spencelaugh might, perchance, contain some reference to that secret which, day and night, weighed so heavily on the chemist's mind. Such being the case, supposing that he, Brackenridge, could get at the contents of this letter, might he not, by such means, chance to light on the key of the secret, and so, despite the widow's efforts, constitute himself master of the situation? The thought was a grand one—one that made his blood flush hotly in his

veins; but how to carry it out? Jerry's incorruptibility as a messenger was known to him of old: by artifice only could he hope to obtain possession of the letter. But how? He mixed himself another tumbler of his favourite stimulant, in the hope that it might tend to sharpen his dulled wits, chatting meanwhile with Jerry on any indifferent topic that came uppermost. Ah! an excellent thought! Suggested by the Fiend, doubtless; but none the worse on that account.

"And is Mogaddo quite well?" said the chemist, changing the conversation abruptly.

"The salubrity of his health is wonderful," answered Jerry.

"Then he pines no longer for the loss of the pretty Pipanta?" said Brackenridge.

"Alas, no! The darling is forgotten already," said the simpleton, mournfully—"forgotten by all but Jerry. But the memory of Pipanta is still dear to Jerry's heart."

"Would Jerry like to see his Pipanta again?" asked the chemist.

"Pipanta is dead, and buried under the Witches' Oak, and will never dance to music again. The great Katango charmed her life out of her. And now, only Mogaddo is left, who whispers strange secrets in Jerry's ear at the full o' the moon."

"Yes; but I can conjure back the ghost of Pipanta, so that Jerry can see it, but not touch it," said the chemist.

"But Jerry is afraid of ghosts," urged the lad. "Jerry will be a ghost himself some day, and dance at midnight under the Witches' Oak, and frighten folk till they go crazy. He! he! a grand life! a rare life!"

"But it would not frighten you to see Pipanta," said Brackenridge. "You shall see her dance as she used to do, on that window-blind."

"But you won't let her come near Jerry?" said the lad, with a look of terror.

"Don't be afraid, man," said the chemist. "I've no wish to harm you." Speaking thus, he opened a door which led into another room; and after an absence of

about half a minute, he returned, carrying something white in his hand—a handkerchief saturated with some liquid which diffused a faint, peculiar odour through the room. Jerry's eyes were fixed on him suspiciously.

"Tut, man! you're not afraid of me, I hope," said the chemist with a boisterous laugh. "You haven't got the pluck of a mouse. Chut! how you tremble. I tell you again, you have nothing to fear. Now keep your eyes fixed firmly on the blind of the window opposite to you, while I hold this for you to smell at, and presently you will see the figure of the pretty Pipanta begin to show itself on the blind—faint at first, and then clearer and clearer, till you will see her as plainly as though she were alive before you."

Even before he had done speaking, he had placed himself behind Jerry's chair, and half encircling the lad with one arm, pressed the saturated handkerchief to his nostrils with the other. Jerry made one or two abortive efforts to get away, but the chemist's iron arm held him remorselessly. In a few seconds, the lad's eyes closed softly, his head drooped backward against Brackenridge's chest, while an expression, strangely sweet and solemn, diffused itself over his face, which but a minute before had been troubled by a dim suspicion of the chemist's good faith, mingled with a vague dread of the coming apparition.

"Jericho! why, the lad's gone already!" said Brackenridge to himself. "It doesn't take much to knock him over, anyhow." Speaking thus, he flung the handkerchief to the other side of the room, and lifting Jerry in his arms, as easily as though he were a child, he deposited the unconscious lad on a sofa, with his head supported by the cushions. "Now for the letter!" muttered Brackenridge. One by one, Jerry's pockets were lightly examined, and then his hat; but the letter was nowhere to be found. "It must be here," murmured the chemist, as he proceeded to unbutton Jerry's waistcoat. And there it was. There, too, was Jerry's pet, Mogaldo; and just as the chemist's fingers were on the point of grasping the paper, the reptile,

lifting its head angrily from the folds of flannel in which it had been concealed, made a swift sudden dart, and bit Brackenridge in the wrist. The chemist drew back his hand with a fearful oath. But next instant he had seized the reptile firmly between his thumb and finger, and dragging it from its cozy nest, he carried it writhing across the room, and throwing open a back-window, hurled it with all his strength far out into the frosty night. His next proceeding was to take a piece of live-coal from the fire, and holding it with the tongs, to press it firmly on his wrist at the spot where the reptile had bitten it, till he had burned away the flesh almost to the bone. The agony was so intense that great drops of perspiration burst out on his forehead, and he bit his lip till he left a mark on it which was visible for several days. When he had put back the coal into the fire, he hastened to pour out and drink off half a tumbler of neat brandy; and after that he proceeded to bandage up his wrist, as well as he was able, with his disengaged hand.

Now for the letter. Poor Jerry still lay without sense or motion, utterly unconscious of the fate which had befallen his favourite. Brackenridge took the letter without fear. He saw, with some surprise, that the address was unmistakably in a man's writing; but as the envelope was merely fastened in the ordinary way, and not sealed, there would be no difficulty in mastering the contents. A little copper kettle was boiling cheerily by the fire, and all that was requisite to do was to let the current of steam play on the gummed part of the envelope for a little while, and the thing was done. The chemist's fingers trembled a little as he took the folded paper out of the envelope, and turned to the lamp to read it.

Next moment, a wild intense pang of baffled rage and despair shot from the chemist's heart, and held him as though he were possessed by a demon; while from his lips, as blue as those of a dead man, proceeded a string of imprecations so intense and dreadful that they could only make themselves heard in a sort of half-choked whisper. The letter was not from Lady Spenceclough at

all, but was merely a note from Sir Gaston to some friend in London, stating that, in consequence of certain unpleasant proceedings at home, he should not be able to keep an appointment as agreed upon. In the first access of his rage, the chemist crumpled up the letter between his fingers, and flung it into the fire, and was only roused to a sense of what he had done by seeing it burst into a blaze. The sight sobered him in an instant. What excuse could he possibly make to Jerry, who was the most faithful of messengers, for destroying the letter? There was only one excuse possible for him, and that was to deny ever having seen the letter—he could lie as hard as anybody, if needs were—and to persuade the simpleton that he had lost it on the road from Belair. Yes, that was the only way practicable out of the confounded mess he had got himself into.

Going up to Jerry, he shook the unconscious lad roughly by the shoulder, and called him by name. But Jerry's sleep was far too sound to be broken by such simple means, or, indeed, by any earthly means whatever, as the chemist, with a horrible, sickening dread gnawing at his heart—a dread in comparison with which his previous anxiety about the letter had been as child's play—was not long in discovering. Again and again he cried aloud, with a strange agony in his voice: "Jerry, Jerry! wake up, man—come, wake up!" but Jerry remained supremely indifferent to all such entreaties. Then the chemist tried to find his pulse, but there was no pulse to find. Next, in hot haste, he fetched a looking-glass out of another room, and held it over the lad's mouth; but obstinate Jerry refused to breathe ever so faintly: the glass remained unsullied. Not even the weakest heart-beat was perceptible to the fingers that hungered so keenly to detect it. The delicate mechanism had stopped for ever: Jerry was growing cold already.

Convinced, at last, that all his efforts at resuscitation were utterly useless, the chemist sat down with a bitter groan opposite poor dead Jerry; and taking his head between his hands, as though it were a loose portion of himself which might chance to fall off and get damaged,

he contemplated his handiwork in silence. But presently he grew frightened. That same sweetly solemn look still rested on the face of the dead lad, and it troubled the chemist wofully: it spoke of something—of a heavenly peace and serenity—so entirely beyond his ordinary experiences, that he could not bear to contemplate it any longer. With that instinctive desire which we all have to cover up our lost ones, he fetched a clean cloth out of a clothes-press in the next room, and spread it gently over the face of the dead boy. It may be that at that moment some pang of regret, pure and simple, for the friend he had lost—a friend, even if a simpleton—made its way to the chemist's hardened heart. If such were the case, it was quenched next moment in burning anxiety for his own safety; for suddenly, and without any preliminary warning, such as the swinging of the garden gate, or the noise of footsteps on the gravel, there came a loud single knock at the front door—a knock which echoed dully through the quiet house, but which fell like a sound of dire omen on the chemist's guilty heart. He staggered back as though smitten by an invisible hand. Who could possibly want him at so late an hour? Suppose he were to pretend not to be at home? But that would never do, because one of the windows of the room looked out at the front of the house, and the tell-tale lamp shining through the blind betrayed his presence to all who might pass that way. He was still considering within himself, when the summons came again, louder and more imperative than before. With a trembling hand he took up the lamp, and carried it into the next room; and turning the key softly on that terrible Thing lying there so mute and moveless, he advanced on tip-toe to the front door, and putting his mouth to the keyhole, called out in a strange hoarse voice: "Who's there? and what do you want?"

"Open the door, Brack, my boy, and you'll soon find out," replied a voice from the out side, in accents rendered slippery by the imbibition of more strong drink than the speaker could conveniently carry

Brackenridge at once recognized the voice as that of



a lame cobbler named Griggs, a man known to everybody as one of the most drunken reprobates in Normanford; and he at once opened the door, first taking the precaution to put up the chain. "Now, Griggs, what is it?" said the chemist, impatiently. "Why do you come bothering me at this time of the night?"

"Well, I'm jiggered if that ain't cool!" said the cobbler, with a hiccup, as he swayed slightly to and fro on the step. "Seeyhere. I don't want you, my buck, at any price: wouldn't have you a gift. Th' individle I want is m' friend Jerry Winch. Here have I been waiting, waiting, waiting more'n half-an-hour, and no signs of Jerry yet. It's tarnation cold standing out here, I can tell ye; so I want to know how much longer you are going to keep the lad?"

"Jerry Winch!" said the chemist, in a dismayed whisper. "You are mistaken. Jerry Winch is not here."

"Oh, fie now, Mister B.! Very naughty to tell fibs," said the cobbler, with an emphatic smack of his drunken lips. "As if I didn't see him with my own blessed eyes come in at this very door! Seeyhere, now; this is how it is," he went on, adjusting his balance to a nicety against the doorpost. "I've been out 'n business this afternoon, and coming home, I found the roads uncommonly shlippery—so shlippery, that when I met my friend Jerry, who happened to be coming the same way, we agreed to walk arm-in-arm to keep one another up. Seeyhere, now. Jerry shlippped twice, but I picked him up and set him on his pins, and we were as right as nincence when we got here. Says young Flybysky to me: 'I've got a letter for old B., and I must call and leave it. You wait here for me; I shan't be long; and then we'll go down the hill together.' 'All right, my turnip,' says I; and away he goes, and I sees the door shut after him; and now you want to persuade me that he ain't here. It looks soapy."

"Well, well," said the chemist, in a perfect agony of bewilderment, "I was perhaps wrong in saying that Jerry was not here."

"In course you was," interrupted the cobbler, gravely.

"I ought to have said that I have got some important business to transact, in which I require Jerry's assistance. We shall not be done till a very late hour; in fact, Jerry will probably stay here all night; so it will be no use whatever your waiting for him any longer."

"That's straightforward—that alters the case altogether," said the cobbler. "If Flybysky can't come, I must go without him. Secyhere, now. I've been waiting here so long that the frost has got to my vitals, and in such a case, brandy's the only cure."

Anything to be relieved of this wretch's drunken maunderings! The brandy was quickly fetched, and eagerly drunk. After vowing that Brackenridge was a regular "brick," and insisting on a parting grasp of the hand, the cobbler turned to go. At the garden-gate he paused. "Secyhere, now. It looked soapy at first, didn't it?" he said, and with a last tipsy nod of the head, he disappeared down the road.

Having refastened the door, Brackenridge went back into the little room where he had left the lamp, and sat down to think. He must get away at once, that was very evident. When Jerry came to be inquired for in the morning, Griggs would remember everything: there would be no lapse of memory with regard to overnight events with such a confirmed toper as the cobbler. But for the cursed accident of this man's presence, Brackenridge felt that he might have hidden away the body where, even if found, no suspicion would have attached to him in the matter. But such a course was now out of the question. He must get away at once and for ever. To this dark ending had his scoundrelly arts brought him. An outcast and a murderer, ever dreading to feel the touch of Justice on his shoulder, he must go forth into the world, and try to seek out a new and obscure home where himself and his crimes were alike unknown.

After a time, he looked at his watch, and then he went upstairs and hurriedly began to pack a small portmanteau. A few minutes were sufficient to accomplish

this task ; then he put on his overcoat, and a thick gray comforter, and a fishing-hat of brown felt. So dressed, no casual acquaintance whom he might chance to encounter would be likely to recognize him. This done, he took his portmanteau in his hand and went quietly down-stairs. He paused for a moment opposite the door of the room where the dead lad lay. His pocket-book was on the chimney-piece of that room ; but not for the world dared he have gone in and got it. Leaving the lamp still burning, he stole out by way of the back-door, which he pulled-to gently after him ; and so away at a rapid pace down the snowy road. Already there was on him the sickening dread which would never utterly leave him again, and which every man feels when he first becomes a criminal—the dread of being *taken*.

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## CHAPTER XXXVII.

### A SECRET EXPEDITION.

WHEN the woman Marie, taking herself into her own confidence, after the fashion of most crazy people, told herself that Henri Duplessis was at White Grange, she stated nothing more than the truth. The Canadian was there in hiding ; and there also, as a matter of course, was the faithful Antoine. Duplessis, in the first instance, on leaving Lilac Lodge, had really made his way to London, although the police were utterly baffled in their efforts to trace him ; and had there lain up in lavender for a while, till the heat of the pursuit had in some measure died away. Marie had been shut up at White Grange all this time, to which place, as soon as his plans were ripe, Duplessis himself made his way, in the disguise of a Savoyard, with an organ at his back ; and there he was shortly afterwards joined by Antoine. This dangerous move had not been made without a purpose—a purpose over which the Canadian's mind had been brooding ever since his flight from Lilac Lodge, and which he was now prepared to put into execution. The carrying out of this design had been

delayed for several weeks, in consequence of the unavoidable absence of Clotilde, Lady Spencelaugh's French maid, who, as a great favour, had been lent by her Ladyship for a couple of months to a particular friend about to proceed to Paris for a short time, whose acquaintance with the French language was of a limited character. Clotilde's presence at Belair was necessary to the plans of Duplessis, and as Clotilde was now back again, further delay was inadvisable.

Hitherto, Duplessis had said nothing to Antoine as to the nature of the great scheme which had been ripening in his brain for so long a time; but now that the eve of the night itself which he had fixed upon for his secret expedition had arrived, there was no necessity for further reticence, more especially as he needed the assistance of that devoted servitor. The best room in White Grange, a room seldom used by the family, and considered in the light of a state-parlour, had been given up to Duplessis. He had swung a sort of hammock in one corner of it; and in this room he slept, read, smoked, and took his meals; and once and again played a greasy game of piquet with Antoine. Considered at its best, it was a mean and shabby little den, and the Canadian's refined tastes rose in revolt a hundred times a day against the dingy squalor by which his present life was environed. But all that would soon be changed. So, as the afternoon waned, he summoned Antoine from the little loft close under the rafters, where that worthy was enjoying a comfortable after-dinner snooze, and bidding him close the door, and draw his chair up to the fire, he proceeded to unfold the details of his scheme.

Any one who had been acquainted with Henri Duplessis during his season of prosperity, would have found it a difficult matter to recognize that "fine gentleman" under the husk which adverse circumstances had of late compelled him to put on. In place of the drawing-room exquisite, whose happy ease of manner, and unfailing supply of polite *persiflage*, he, perhaps, had secretly envied, he would have seen before him an

olive-skinned and rather dirty-looking individual, with a crop of short, black, spiky hair, and a ragged black moustache; dressed in a suit of clothes whose best days had long been over. But the fine old manner was not to be hidden by a ragged coat. Duplessis was still a gentleman, though his supper might be nothing but bread and cheese and table-beer. Even surly old Nathan Orchard, who, as a rule, had scant respect for any one but himself, never addressed his singular lodger without first carrying a finger to his forehead; and it is almost needless to add that no change of circumstances could weaken in the slightest degree the devotion and affectionate respect with which Antoine regarded his master.

"Come here, my chicken, I want to talk seriously to thee," said Duplessis, as Antoine closed the door. "Nearer still, for we must have no eavesdroppers. That will do.—Thou seest these two bank-notes? They are of the value of ten pounds respectively, and are absolutely the last fragments of a once comfortable little fortune. Our old curmudgeon of a host will claim them as his due to-morrow, and when once they pass out of my fingers, one shilling and fourpence-halfpenny will be all that Henri Duplessis can call his own in the world. A pleasant prospect, is it not, my infant."

Antoine's chubby face lengthened visibly; and there gradually crept over it such an expression of blank, but still comical, consternation, that Duplessis could not help bursting into a hearty laugh.

"Our lucky star is hidden for a time behind the clouds, my Antoine," resumed the Canadian. "I must turn ambulatory musician for a livelihood, and watch the world and its doings over the green baize of a barrel-organ, in company with a small monkey of many accomplishments."

"And what is to become of me, Monsieur Henri?" demanded Antoine, in a pitiful voice.

"Ices in summer, and coffee in winter. Let them be good and cheap, and in a dozen years thy fortune will be made."

"Ah! Monsieur Henri, I don't want fortune; I don't want anything but to stay always with my dear master. To share his lot whatever it may be; to work for him now that he is poor, as——"

"Enough, my dear boy—enough!" said Duplessis, with a sigh. "Thy words stir strange feelings in my breast, such as had better remain unwakened. Thou hast the finest heart in the world; and so long as thou art left to me, I cannot believe that my good star has deserted me entirely. My fortunes truly are at a desperate ebb. But listen, my cabbage, listen with all thine ears: I have a scheme, a splendid scheme, which, if it only succeed, will make us both rich men for life!"

"Ah! Monsieur Henri, I knew your genius too well to fear that you would ever have need to walk long in the gutter."

"It was to carry out this scheme that I came back from London into the very jaws of the lion, as one may say," resumed Duplessis; "and it would have been carried out weeks ago, had not Clotilde been away. At last I have succeeded in arranging everything for to-night. How are thy nerves, my Antoine? Does thy pulse beat steadily?—is there no lurking fear at the bottom of thy heart? The service is one of some danger; and thou mayst as well put thy revolver into thy pocket before we set out."

"Monsieur has proved my courage before to-day," said Antoine, proudly. "He has no occasion to doubt me now."

"I do not doubt thee, thou pig-headed son of a hippopotamus. I know that when the moment comes, thou wilt be true as steel. Oh Antoine, if only we are successful! Think what openings there are in the New World, in Mexico, in California, for men of enterprise, with capital at their back."

"But Monsieur has not yet favoured me with any particulars of his great scheme," said Antoine, quietly.

"A merited reproof. *Ecoutez donc*. In the first place, we leave here to-night as the clock strikes twelve, and then——." The Canadian's voice sunk to a whis-

per, and the two heads came together over the little table. Listening Antoine took in all the details of the plot eagerly.

"It is a scheme worthy of the genius of Monsieur, and it cannot be otherwise than successful," said the glowing Antoine, as Duplessis sank back in his chair, and prepared to light a cheroot. "But has Monsieur decided what to do with *La Chatte*?"

"No, Antoine," said Duplessis, pausing in his occupation, while a deep frown darkened his face; "I have not decided. What *can* I do with her? To go on for ever paying her board and lodging at this place would ruin a millionaire. Our friend, Monsieur Orchard, does not grant us the asylum of his roof without charging us a heavy price for it. And yet, to attempt to take her with us out of the country, would be to run a thousand risks; more, I confess, than I have the courage to meet. What to do, I know not."

"A couple of pinches of that gray powder, which Monsieur once showed me, dropped into her chocolate some morning, and, pouf! her little candle is blown out for ever, and nobody but ourselves will be any the wiser."

"A devilish scheme, Antoine, and one that I can never agree to. No; we must find some less objectionable mode of getting rid of her."

"Monsieur is over-particular," said Antoine, drily. "In such cases, indecision is only another name for weakness. When this little Belair business is well over, let Monsieur go to Paris, and enjoy himself for awhile, leaving me still here. The claws of *La Chatte* must be clipped at once and for ever, and Antoine Gaudin is the man to do it. Monsieur has no occasion to trouble his mind further in the matter."

Antoine twisted the waxed end of his moustache tenderly as he spoke, while an evil smile crept over his face, which brought into view his great yellow wolfish teeth. But Duplessis, smoking his cheroot thoughtfully, and gazing intently into the fire, answered never a word.

The comforting words whispered by Mrs. Winch in the ear of Lady Spencelaugh, as that person came back to consciousness in the little vestry, and reiterated again and again, as the two women sat together in the privacy of her Ladyship's dressing-room, were not without their effect on the mind of her on whose behoof they were spoken. Surely, what the widow said must be true! John English had sailed in the *Ocean Child*; the *Ocean Child* had been lost with all on board. Granting, then, John English to have been the real heir, of which there could no longer be much doubt, the title and estates, now that he was gone, would come, in proper legal sequence, to Gaston; and this horrible confession, which she had been driven by the force of circumstances to make, would, for the sake of the family, be hushed up by the few people to whom it was known. But even supposing that, by accident or design, some tittle of the truth were to leak out, and become the common property of that select circle in which her Ladyship lived and moved—the gossip of inferior people she held in utter contempt—no one knew better than she did how quietly but efficiently Time's busy fingers work at the cleansing of a soiled reputation, provided that the stain be not of too deep a dye to begin with. Nor how patiently the old graybeard will strive to mend the flaws in your character, as though it were a piece of cracked china, only the porcelain on which he works must be of the finest quality, and not composed of inferior clay: and it is wonderful how much your patched porcelain will often stand in the way of wear and tear, if only common care be used in the handling of it. Three or four years, her Ladyship thought, spent not unpleasantly among the German spas, and the galleries of Florence and Rome, and then she might come back with safety, bringing with her a renovated reputation, which would never be too rudely questioned by the denizens of Vanity Fair, where so much base alloy is quietly winked at, and allowed to pass current as sterling coin.

Lady Spencelaugh, deriving what scraps of comfort were possible to her from these considerations, and from



the cheering words of her humble friend, Martha Winch, allowed herself, after a time, to be put to bed. She lay quietly enough, so long as the landlady was with her; but no sooner had that indefatigable person taken her leave for the night, than her Ladyship arose. Utterly tired out as she was, both in body and mind, by the events of the day, her brain was yet far too excited for sleep; besides, the quietude of bed frightened her. Her restless fancy peopled the dusky chamber with all sorts of unwelcome visitors, till, unable any longer to bear their company, she crept, shawled and slippered, to the cosy companionship of the dressing-room fire. There, crouched on the rug, between sleeping and waking, she allowed her mind to play at hide-and-seek with the distorted and ever-changing crowd of doubts, and hopes, and fears, which now claimed her as their own; and enacted over and over again, in fancy, the whole painful drama of the day just closed.

Midnight came and went, but Lady Spencelaugh never stirred. She still lay coiled on the rug, with white fingers tightly intertwined, her head resting on a bunch of rosebuds, cunningly worked with coloured silks on the cushion of a *poutouil*. The silvery voice of the Sèvres clock on the mantelpiece had just told the hour of two, when she was roused from her state of semi-stupor by the noise of the opening door. She turned her head uneasily on its pillow, and said: "Is that you, Clotilde? You may go to bed. I shall not want——" The rest of the sentence died away in her throat at sight of two strange men, their faces covered with black crape, coming rapidly towards her. They were on her before she could scream or give any alarm.

"Speak, and you are a dead woman!" exclaimed one of the men, seizing her roughly by the shoulder, and presenting a pistol at her head.

"Oh, spare my life!" she contrived to gasp out.

"Obey my orders implicitly, and no harm shall happen to you," said the man. "But dare to give the least alarm, and that moment you die!"

He then bade her rise and seat herself in an easy-

chair. With that, the second man whipped a coil of thin rope out of his pocket, and proceeded, dexterously and neatly, to tie her Ladyship in the chair, so that she could move neither hand nor foot; after which he proceeded to gag her with her own pocket-handkerchief, and a small strip of wood, which he had evidently brought for the purpose. When he had done, had her life depended on it, Lady Spencelaugh could not have uttered anything beyond a faint moan.

"Await my return here," said the first man, as the other one stepped back a pace or two, to admire the neatness of his handiwork. "But first bolt both the doors, so that there may be no fear of intruders."

There was something in the tone of this man's voice which, even through the midst of her terror, seemed to strike familiarly on Lady Spencelaugh's ear. Certainly she knew the voice, she said to herself again and again; but where and when she had heard it before was a question which, in the present perturbed state of her mind, she found herself utterly unable to answer. As before stated, the faces of the men were hidden by crape vizards; their dress was homely and commonplace enough; and their boots were covered with some soft material, which deadened the sound of their footsteps.

The second man now seated himself on a chair close to Lady Spencelaugh, and proceeded to light a cigarette. Him her Ladyship regarded with indifference, now that she found her life was not in danger; but her gaze rested uneasily on the first man. Why had he come hither, and what was he about to do? He approached the chimney-piece as she held her breath. His fingers seemed to be wandering, as if in quest of something, among the intricate scroll-work, and quaint, old-world conceits, which the hand of some dead-and-gone sculptor, making the hard marble plastic to his fancy, had carved with loving care and minuteness all over the snowy surface; and her eyes dilated as she watched him. Could it be possible that to this veiled midnight plunderer was known the precious secret guarded by her with such jealous watchfulness—the secret which she had fondly

hoped was known to no one among the living, herself and Martha Winch excepted? Had the dead found a tongue to whisper it, or by what other occult means had her strange visitor become possessed of the knowledge? Her breath came in thick stifling gasps as she watched him. But when she saw his fingers press gently the fifth marble button from the top on the left-hand side of the mantel-shelf, and at the same moment turn thrice to the left the small brass knob hidden behind the central scroll-work—when she saw one side of the chimney-piece roll gently back on hidden wheels, disclosing, as it did so, a narrow opening in the wall, evidently leading to some mysterious chamber beyond: when Lady Spence-laugh saw all this, knowing that the hoarded treasures of her life—all the gems and precious stones, the gatherings of many years, and which, next to her son, Gaston, she loved better than aught else on earth—were about to be snatched from her for ever, her heart gave way within her, and with a faint groan, that was stifled in her throat, her head sunk forward on her breast, and for a time she remembered nothing more. When she recovered her consciousness, the two men were still there. One of them held a small spirit-flask in his hand, which he had evidently been applying to her Ladyship's lips, in the hope of bringing her round more quickly.

"She will do now," said he who seemed the leader. "Put on the gag. We have no time to lose." With that he turned to a small table near at hand, on which were spread a quantity of gems and precious stones of various kinds, some of them still uncut, while others were cut and set as necklaces, bracelets, rings, or other articles of personal adornment: a glittering throng, truly. The gag was in her mouth, and Lady Spence-laugh looked on in dumb despair while the veiled man swept all her cherished treasures into a wash-leather bag, and then disposed of the same in some safe place about his person. They were lost to her without hope of recovery: all her precious hoard was gone, the slow, patient accumulation of twenty years. This hoarding of precious stones had been a monomania with her,

secretly pursued, for not even Sir Philip himself, although aware of her weakness in this respect, had had any idea of the extent to which she had carried it. By means of what devilish arts had this white-handed thief learned the secret of the hiding-place? As her bright darlings slipped from her eyes for ever, she felt at that moment as though it would be a pleasant thing to die, and so end all this weary coil of calamities which was encompassing her around without any hope of escape. This brief, vivid drama in which she had been an involuntary actress, had had for her such an intensity of meaning as to cause her to forget for a little while that other dark drama of the day just done, in which she had played one of the leading parts. But now that this second act was consummated, the full weight of her misery flowed over her in a double wave, under whose accumulated force her very soul seemed to die within her, leaving her, for a time, powerless to suffer further. She had some dim sense of being left alone, and of hearing the key turned in the lock as the two men beat a hasty retreat—yes, alone, bound hand and foot, powerless to stir or speak, and without hope of release till morning should reveal her condition to some one—if, indeed, she could live thus till morning. To die would, perhaps, be best.

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## CHAPTER XXXVIII.

## THE EAST WING.

It was quite dark by the time Jane Garrod got home from Belair, which place she had left immediately after it had been decided to visit the family vault; with the result of which visit she would of course remain unacquainted till the following morning. The snow was coming down fast as Jane plodded homeward along the solitary bye-paths which she knew so well; and when she turned a corner of the road, and while still some distance off, saw the ruddy glow of fire-light that streamed across the white road from the window of her own little home, her heart felt glad within her to think

that her lot in life was cast in humble places, such as the sweet flower of Content loves best to haunt.

Jane scraped her feet, and shook some of the snow off her gown and shawl; and wondering whether Abel would have had sufficient forethought to have the kettle boiling against her return, she quietly opened the door and went in. She went in, to find a bearded, stalwart individual sitting by the chimney-corner, who no sooner caught sight of her than he started up, and crossing the floor in a couple of strides, seized her by both hands, and shook them heartily, and then stooped and kissed her just as heartily on the cheek.

"Thank Heaven, you are come back safe and sound!" were Jane's first words when she had recovered in some measure from her surprise, and had further refreshed herself with a quiet fit of crying. "But, oh, what a deal of pain and anxiety you would have spared both Miss Frederica and me if you had only written to tell us you were about to leave Pevsey Bay!"

"I did write to you," said John, "only an hour before the train started, telling you that I was going to America to try and hunt up some proofs of my identity."

"Certainly your letter never came to hand," said Jane. "As I've many a time told Miss Frederica, there was some treachery at work in the case, of which we knew nothing. But we need not mind that now. May I ask, sir, whether you have succeeded in finding what you went so far to look for?"

"I have—beyond my utmost expectations," answered John. "But not another word shall you drag out of me till you have told me all the news about a certain young lady."

"A certain lady is quite well, and that is all I can tell you about her at present," said Jane, with a smile. "I have been with her all day, and when I left her this afternoon, her last words were: 'Oh, if *he* would but come!' Whom she meant by *he*, I could not of course imagine."

John thanked his stars that just then the fire gave

too dim a light to allow of the hot flush that rose to his forehead being seen even by Jane's friendly eyes.

"And Sir Philip?" said John, interrogatively, after a little pause. "I ought to have asked after him first, but even now, I almost dread to put the question."

"Sir Philip is dead; and you are now Sir Arthur Spencelaugh," said Jane, solemnly; and with that she got up from her chair, and swept John a stately old-fashioned curtsy, full of obeisance and respectful homage, and stood to hear his commands.

John turned away his head. "If I had only come in time!" he murmured, at last—"in time to see him and tell him who I am, and ask his blessing! I loved him, Jane Garrod, loved him and revered him from the first moment I saw him, as I never loved and revered any other man. And now I shall never see him more on earth!"

Jane, leaving him alone in the twilight with his grief, went softly out into another room. In about half an hour she came back carrying a lighted lamp. "It is needful, Sir Arthur, that you should go up to Belair at an early hour to-morrow," she said, "there is much to do, and——"

"Hush!" said the young man, gently laying his hand on her arm. "You must not call me by that name—at least, not till the world shall have acknowledged my right to bear it; and even then, to you, to whom I owe more than I can possibly repay, let me never be other than plain John English!"

"Miss Frederica, sir, has fought your battle bravely while you have been away," said Jane, as she went deftly about her preparations for tea.

"God bless her for it!" said John, heartily.

"But to-day was the hardest time of all for her—almost more than she could bear."

"How so? I do not understand you," said John, with re-awakened interest.

Jane was burning to tell her guest all that had happened, affecting his interests, since his departure from Pevsey Bay; and now that his curiosity was aroused by

her last words, she took care that it should not flag again till she had said all that she wanted to say. John himself, when once Jane had begun her narrative, was as eager to hear as she was to tell.

Tea was an hour later than usual that evening at the little station-house, a want of punctuality on the part of his wife which surprised Abel Garrod even more than the return of John English had done, or the narrative of the strange events which had happened that day at Belair. When tea was over, John produced his meerschauum, and Abel his yard of clay; and then, in order to satisfy Jane's evident curiosity in the matter, John entered upon some of the details of what had befallen him after leaving Pevsey Bay. Among other things, he told her how he had secured a berth on board the *Ocean Child*, and had even gone on board of her, preparatory to sailing, when, hearing accidentally, at the last moment, that a brother of Mr. Felix, who had so nobly befriended him some years before, had just arrived in Liverpool from Australia, he had at once gone on shore again, preferring the risk of losing his passage to missing the opportunity of seeing the brother of his dead friend, for whose ear he had certain private messages, which Mr. Felix had charged him to deliver in person, should a possibility of doing so ever arise.

As it happened, fortunately for himself, John English did miss his passage on board the *Ocean Child*, which vessel was lost a few days after sailing, with all on board. John had been tracked by Brackenridge on board the ill-fated ship, and when news came of the wreck, the chemist at once concluded that Mrs. Jakeway's late lodger was one of those who had perished.

John English lay, on the night of his return, in the same cosy little room in which he had passed so many weary days and nights during the time that Jane Garrod was nursing him of his wound; but his brain was far too busy to allow of sleep coming near him. He drew up the blind before getting into bed, and then lay staring out at the dark cloud-squadrons hurrying brokenly across the sky—no unmeet emblem, it seemed to

him, of the hurrying throng of broken thoughts coursing so restlessly just then across his brain, all darkened and solemnized by the knowledge that never more on earth would he see that face which he had learned to love and reverence before even his wildest dreams had pictured it as the face of his father. Two or three hours passed away, and John's eyes were as wide open as ever; when suddenly he leaped out of bed, attracted to the window by a glare of reddish light in the western horizon, which he had been vaguely watching for some time, but which was now rapidly growing so bright and lurid as to claim his serious attention. Suddenly there came a tap at his door, and then Abel Garrod spoke: "For Heaven's sake, get up, sir, as quickly as you can! *Belair is on fire!*"

Leaving Lady Spencelaugh bound and gagged, so that it was impossible for her either to stir or speak, the two men locked the door of the room behind them, and then stole noiselessly along the corridor leading from her Ladyship's apartments, and so down the broad shallow stairs, at the foot of which they were met by Clotilde, thanks to whose good offices they had obtained such easy and unopposed access to the interior of the Hall. The French girl carried a small lamp in her hand, and, after laying a warning finger on her lips, she beckoned the two men to follow her, and so led the way across the entrance-hall, and then through one or two winding passages, till she brought them to a little door at the back of the house, which opened into the kitchen-garden.

"All safe, so far," said Clotilde in a whisper: "you must go back by the same way that you came. The garden-walk has been trodden by half-a-dozen people since the snow ceased falling, so that there is no danger of your footsteps being tracked."

"Thou hast been a good child, and thou shalt not be forgotten," said one of the men, as he chucked the waiting-girl under the chin. "But the most difficult portion of thy task is yet before thee. When the dis-



covery comes, be careful not to overact thy part. Don't be too much surprised—too much horrified. Call up thy tears once or twice—tears look so genuine—in commiseration of my Lady's sufferings; but avoid being noisy. And now, *au revoir*; thou shalt hear from me shortly by a sure hand."

"Such a girl as that is!" said the second man in an oily whisper, as he came up behind the other a minute or two later. "She would have kept me there till——"

"Silence, babbler!" said the other one with a snarl. "Reserve thy *contes d'amour* for another season. Half an hour ago, Henri Duplessis was a gentleman; now, he is a common thief."

Clotilde, left alone, felt far too happy to go to bed just then, for Antoine had spoken loving words, and she wanted to muse over all that he had said. She drew her thick woollen shawl over her head, and gliding back noiselessly through the hushed house, softly unfastened a door on the opposite side of the hall, which admitted her on to the terrace, one portion of which was sheltered by a verandah; and here she paced backwards and forwards for nearly an hour, lost in a vague, rosy love-dream, till the piercing cold of the frosty night began to make itself felt. Breaking out of her reverie, she went indoors; and after refastening the door, she proceeded to the little ante-room where she had left her lamp before going out. Opening the door, she started back in terror at finding the room full of smoke—nay, there was more than smoke, there was actual live flame; red quivering tongues licking the wood-work greedily; great lurid blotches, like some terrible eruption, momentarily spreading, and merging one into another, and gathering strength and fierceness as they spread, and already far beyond any curative means at command of the French girl. She understood it at a glance. The lamp had flared up for want of snuffing, and the flame had caught the tapestry with which the walls in part were lined, and had so spread to the panelling behind, which age had rendered almost as dry and inflammable as tinder. This ante-room was situated in the east wing, and the

east wing was by far the oldest part of Belair. True, it had been renovated and repaired at different periods, but always in keeping with the original idea, which had apparently been to make as much use of timber and plaster, and as little of stone and brick, as possible. Lady Spencelaugh's apartments were situated in the east wing, her sitting-room and boudoir on the ground-floor, and her bed and dressing rooms immediately over them. Of the remaining rooms in the wing, one was the ante-room, where the fire originated; another, a great desolate billiard-room; while the rest were seldom used except on those rare occasions when Belair was full of guests. In the whole of the east wing only two people ordinarily slept, namely, Lady Spencelaugh and her maid.

Stupefied with fear at the sight of this new and terrible enemy, and utterly deserted by her usual *sang-froid* and presence of mind, Clotilde rushed back through the passage, and so into the entrance-hall, screaming "Fire! fire!" Then, unbolting one of the doors, she rushed out into the park, and hurried off in the direction of White Grange, in the vague hope of overtaking Antoine.

Clotilde's screams had been heard by no one except by the miserable woman who had been left bound and gagged by the two men, and on her ears the warning words fell with a terrible significance. In all that great house, she was the only person not asleep, and she could neither stir nor speak. The fire was spreading rapidly. It was no longer confined to the ante-room, but had fiercely laid hold of the great oaken staircase that led from the entrance-hall to the upper floors of the east wing; and was having a merry game to itself in the billiard-room; and would soon force its way into the empty chambers overhead. The pungent odour of the burning wood came in hot heavy puffs under the door of the room in which Lady Spencelaugh sat helpless, and gave a dread confirmation to the words of Clotilde. She listened, as she never seemed to have listened before, for some voice or other token of the vicinage of human beings; but she heard nothing save the crackling of the flames as they seized on the wood-work at the end of

the corridor, and seemed to be testing its quality with their teeth. She had undergone so much mental and bodily torture during the last few hours, that the keen edge of anguish was in some measure blunted; and now that the end of all her sufferings seemed so imminent, she sank into a sort of dull stupor of despair, which lent a strange air of unreality both to herself and her surroundings, making her feel as though she were merely acting a part in some weird, fantastic dream, from which she should presently awake; dulling for a time, as though by the influence of some powerful narcotic, both overwrought body and overwrought brain.

Nor was this spell, if such it may be called, broken till she heard a sudden rush of voices, and knew that the other inmates had taken the alarm. A little later, and there was a louder clamour of voices than before, and she could hear her own name called aloud; and then she knew that they had missed her, and that some effort would be made for her rescue. Therewith the desire to live came back upon her in all its intensity; and what a wild, agonised prayer was that which, from the lowest depths of her heart, went up to Heaven's gate, that she might not die just yet! That she, no martyr to any religion save that of Self, might not be called upon to undergo this fiery trial—that she might live, were it only for a little while; live to redress some of the wrong she had done; live that she might have leisure to repent!

Presently she heard Gaston's voice giving some orders to the men outside, and the sound thrilled her mother's heart. Whatever might happen to herself, her darling was safe; and from that moment one half of her calamity seemed lifted off her. The room, by this time, was full of stifling smoke, and the menacing crackling of the flames sounded louder with every passing minute. There seemed to be quite a crowd of people collected in the shrubbery outside. She could hear the deep murmur of many voices, now loud, now low, without being able to distinguish anything that was said; and ever and anon the sharp, imperative tones of Gaston sounding clearly above the rest, with what seemed to her a

ring of suppressed agony in their very clearness. After what appeared a terribly long delay, a ladder was found that would reach to the windows of her room; and scarcely had its tip touched the wall, when a man was climbing it with the agility of a sailor, under whose fierce blows, next instant, the panes of the window fell in fragments to the ground.

"Mother! mother! where are you?" called Gaston, for it was he who had climbed the ladder.

The windows of Lady Spenceclough's apartments were of the old-fashioned diamond-paned sort, with iron cross-bars worked into their frames, and opening only by means of small casements; so that it was impossible for any one to get either in or out that way; and her Ladyship had often secretly felicitated herself on the additional security which her rooms derived from the peculiar formation of the windows.

As it was impossible for Gaston to obtain ingress through the window, all that he could do was to call again, still more loudly than before: "Mother! mother! where are you? For Heaven's sake, speak to me!" But the room was filled with a dense smoke, which only seemed to throw back the ruddy glare that shone in through the windows, without being penetrated by it. Gaston's eyes, as he clung desperately to the bars outside, were quite unable to pierce the obscurity within; besides which, he had every reason to believe that his mother was in bed in the inner room, and his efforts were directed to the rousing of her from her supposed sleep. Again and again he called her; and she, in turn, put forth all her little strength in a desperate struggle to free herself from some of her bonds, or at least to get rid of the gag. But all her efforts proved utterly futile, and seemed only to have the effect of rendering her a faster prisoner than before.

"My God! she must have been stifled in bed by the smoke!" she heard Gaston say at last; and then she heard him go down, and with that her last chance of escape seemed to die utterly away. She knew that they would not have tried to reach her through the window,

had not all ordinary means of access to her rooms been blocked by the fire. Through the broken window she heard some man who had a louder voice than his neighbours say that the rooms below were all on fire now, and that the thick beams in the ceiling would soon be burned through, and after that—— The man's voice was lost again in the murmur of the crowd, and Lady Spencelaugh's soul shuddered within her. There was no hope left her, then—none! Then came another thought: So much for her yet to do, and so little time to do it in!

A sudden cheer from the crowd. What could it mean? And next moment the sound of hurried footsteps advancing along the corridor that led to her rooms. Then, the crash of a heavy body against the door; another, and the door broke away from its hinges; and through the smoke there advanced upon her a tall dark figure, which, in that first moment of surprise, she could not look upon as other than an apparition from the dead. The current of air from the broken window had thinned the smoke in some measure, and the room was filled with the ruddy glare of the burning house. In the midst of that glare stood he whom, but a few short hours ago, she had fondly hoped lay buried fathoms deep beneath the waves—he whose young life she had blighted, whose death she had compassed—he whom she had hated above all others—the eldest-born of her dead husband, and now Sir Arthur Spencelaugh. Oh, the bitterness of owing her life to the courage of this man! Was this the method of his forgiveness?

“You, and in this position, Lady Spencelaugh!” said Sir Arthur, as his quick eye took in the details of the case. “What scoundrel has been at work here? But you must tell me afterwards, for we have not a minute to spare if we would get back in safety.”

He had his pocket-knife out even while he was speaking, and was rapidly cutting the cords that fastened her. But even when released from her bonds, she was utterly unable to move either hand or foot, and Sir Arthur seeing this, hastened into an adjoining room, and brought thence a large counterpane, in which he

proceeded to wrap the helpless woman. When this was done, he took her up lightly in his arms, and carried her out by the way he had come. At the end of the corridor he paused. Before him lay the gulf of raging fire, several feet in width, which he had so boldly overleaped when on his way to search for Lady Spencelaugh, but before which all the other volunteers had paused aghast. Even Gaston, brave enough on all ordinary occasions, had trembled and fallen back, as doubtful of his ability to reach the opposite side. This fiery gulf occupied the spot where the old staircase had been, which was one of the first objects that fell a prey to the flames. From the opposite side of the staircase ran what was known as the Stone Gallery, and the space between the end of this gallery and the corridor where Sir Arthur was now standing was filled by a staircase no longer, but by a seething bed of fire. The leap across from the gallery to the corridor was a desperate one under any circumstances, since to miss your footing on the opposite side meant nothing less than destruction; and burdened as Sir Arthur now was, to get back the same way was a sheer impossibility. The men awaiting his return in the gallery had given him a hearty cheer when they saw him emerge through the smoke, holding in his arms the object of his search; but the cheer had ended in something very like a groan, when they saw and recognized the difficulty which he was now called upon to face. There was a minute's intense silence, which Sir Arthur was the first to break. "Fetch up the long ladder out of the shrubbery," he called to the men in the gallery. They understood in an instant why he wanted it, and two minutes later there it was. With hearty good-will they proceeded to push it out from the gallery, and over the burning wreck of the staircase, till its other end rested on the corridor at the feet of Sir Arthur; who then, taking up his burden again, stepped lightly from rung to rung across the fiery gulf, till he reached the opposite side. Then he gave up his charge into the hands of the pale-faced Gaston, who as yet knew not the name of the fearless stranger.

## CHAPTER XXXIX.

## A MADWOMAN'S REVENGE.

NIGHT after night, with quiet, stealthy patience, the woman Marie laboured at the task she had set herself to do. But it was not every night that she could so work, for there were quick ears at White Grange. More than once she had been surprised in the dead of the night by the sudden entrance of Peg Orchard, her youthful gaoler, who slept in the next room, and who had been disturbed by the rasping of Marie's knife against the iron window-bars; and on one occasion, old Nathan himself had put in a sudden appearance, carrying a lighted candle in his hand. But Marie was far too alert and wary to be caught at work, and was always found in bed by her nocturnal visitors, and, to all appearance, asleep. So it was only when the wintry winds, blowing shrilly round the exposed Grange, shook the crazy old building in its burly arms, causing doors and windows to rattle and creak, and haunting the dark wakefulness of such of the inmates as could not sleep with strange weird noises, never heard at other times, that she could labour at her task with any degree of safety. And now that task was all but done. With the old knife which she had picked up by stealth in the orchard, she had sawn through two of the iron bars with which one of the windows was secured, or so nearly through them that two or three hours more would see her labour accomplished. Had not the bars been rusted and corroded with age, they would probably have baffled all her efforts with the feeble means at her command; but such as they were, she had overcome every difficulty, and now her reward seemed almost within her grasp.

She had been working for freedom. To get away, anywhere, out of that horrible prison, in which she had been shut up for so many weary, weary weeks, was the one absorbing idea that filled her secret thoughts by day and night. What she should do after getting away—what was to become of her, without money or friends, at that bleak season of the year, was a thought that rarely

troubled her: that one passionate longing to escape absorbed all the little mental energy that was left her in these latter days. Whenever she tried to look forward, to calculate future probabilities, there rose before her mental vision a dim blurred picture, in which everything showed indistinctly, as though seen through a mist that was far too dense for her wearied aching brain to penetrate. It was always the same, too, when she sat down on the floor, and stuffing her fingers into her ears, tried to think out some scheme of vengeance upon the arch-enemy of her life. She knew that Duplessis was beneath the same roof with her; she had heard his voice on two or three occasions, although she had never seen him since the first night of her incarceration; and the sound had filled her with such a secret but intense fury, that had she been able to reach him, she would have flown at his throat like some savage creature of the woods. Yet, with all her hatred of the man, whenever she tried to work out to a definite issue the feeling with which she regarded him, and looking forward to the time when she should be once more a free woman, strove to trace mentally the outline of some scheme by means of which she should wipe off, at once and for ever, the accumulated score of many years, her feeble brain would again play her false. However hard she might strive to retain her grip of them, her thoughts would begin to slide and veer, and crash one against another, like icebergs in a troubled sea; and then the inevitable fog would swoop suddenly down, and everything would become blurred and dim; and she would wake from her reverie with a start, and a childish treble laugh, and set to work with renewed assiduity at the dressing of her dolls. But when midnight came round, and all the house was still, then she seemed an altogether different creature as she crouched on the window-seat, with her knife in her hand, labouring slowly and steadily, with a sort of concentrated ferocity of patience, in which there was no trace of a weakened intellect.

"You and I, *cher Henri*, have a heavy account to settle," she would often murmur to herself. "It is a



debt of long standing, and must be paid to the uttermost farthing."

The night fixed upon by Duplessis as the one for the secret expedition of himself and Antoine to Belair, was also the one on which Marie had decided, provided the weather were favourable, to carry out her long-cherished plan of escape. During the afternoon there had been a light fall of snow, just sufficient to whiten the moorlands, but not deep enough, except here and there, where it had drifted, to impede walking. As night set in, a keen northerly breeze sprang up, which crisped the fallen flakes, and whistled shrilly round the old Grange, grumbling hoarsely in the chimneys, and trying the fastenings of door and window, and making the madwoman's heart beat high with hope. If only it would last till an hour after midnight! She went to bed as usual about ten o'clock: she could trust to her instinct to awake at the first stroke of twelve. When Peg Orchard left her that night, Marie called the girl back, after she had got outside the door, to give her another kiss. Then she got into bed, and in five minutes was soundly asleep; but before the clock on the staircase had done striking twelve, she was as wide awake as ever she had been in her life. She sat up in bed, and listened intently. The wind seemed, if anything, more blustering than ever. How lucky that was! She would have dearly liked to scream in chorus with its wild free music, so light-hearted did she feel; but she bit one of her fingers instead, till the purple teeth-marks made a deep indented ring round it. Then she slipped noiselessly out of bed, and crept to the door, and put her ear to the keyhole. *Diable!* they were not all in bed yet, those beasts there! She could distinguish a faint murmur of voices below stairs. Presently a door opened, and the voices grew louder, and then she recognised them as the voices of Duplessis and Antoine; and she snarled in the dark, as she listened to them, like some ferocious animal. She could not distinguish a word that was said, and in a minute or two the two men seemed to go out at the front door, and then everything but the wind was still. For a full hour

longer she crouched against the door, except for her breathing, as rigid and motionless as a mummy ; listening, with all her senses on the alert. But the dead silence inside the house was unbroken by any sound that owed its origin to human agency. When the clock struck one she rose up, as silent as a shadow, and stretched out her cramped arms, and pushed the tangled ends of her hair out of her eyes, and began to set about her great achievement. An hour's quiet steady labour with her jagged blade, and at the end of that time the first great obstacle was overcome. The two bars, sawn completely through, came away from their places, and were carefully deposited by her on the floor. The window was a considerable height from the ground, but that was a difficulty readily overcome. Taking the sheets and coverlet off the bed, she dexterously twisted and knotted them into a stout serviceable rope, one end of which she proceeded to fasten round the stump of one of the bars, while the other end hung down outside nearly to the ground. But little now remained to be done. Having inducted herself into a little more clothing than she had been in the habit of wearing for some time past, but still with her favourite red flannel dressing-robe outside, and with a white handkerchief thrown over her head, and tied under her chin, she felt herself thoroughly equipped for her undertaking. In one corner of the room was a rude box, in which she had been in the habit of keeping her dolls, and the little scraps of finery out of which their dresses were manufactured. One by one she took up the puppets and kissed them tenderly. "I am going to leave you, my pretty ones," she murmured. "You will look for me to-morrow, but I shall not be here. I am going a long, long journey ; whither, as yet, I hardly know ; but out into the snow and cold wind, where your tender little buds of life would quickly perish. I leave you to the care of that good child, Peg. She will attend to you when I shall be far away. And now, adieu ! I love not to part from you, but freedom is before me, and I cannot stay. Adieu ! my little ones, adieu !"

She shut down the lid of the box with a weary sigh,

and then stood thinking, or trying to think, for the effort was almost a futile one, with her hands pressed tightly across her temples. But whatever the idea might be that she was striving to grasp, it was gone before she could seize it; so, with an impatient little "Pouf!" she dismissed the subject from her mind. One more pull, to test the strength of the knots she had made in her rope; then she took up her knife, kissed it, and stuck it in her girdle; and then she crept through the open window, and taking the rope in both hands, slid nimbly to the ground, and felt that she was free. There must have been a sort of mental intoxication in the feeling, for no sooner had she reached the ground than she went down on her knees, and seizing her short black hair in both hands, as though to steady herself in some measure, she gave vent to a burst of horrible silent laughter; a sort of laughter that was largely mingled with ferocity, and which seemed almost to tear her in two, so violent was it; leaving her breathless and exhausted when it died out, which it did as suddenly as it had begun. "I've not been so gay for a long time," she murmured, as she gathered herself up, and set her face towards the open moors. "I could sing, to-night; I could dance—oh, how I could dance! only it would not be decorous in a lady circumstanced as I am."

The window through which she had escaped was at the back of the house, and Marie now found herself in the rick-yard, as it was called, from which a gate opened at once on to the moors. One source of disquietude was removed from her mind: she knew that Duke, the great house-dog, had gone with one of the young men to a distant fair; Peg had told her so; so there was no fear of an encounter with him. Just outside the rick-yard gate, Marie's eye was caught by something, and she stopped for a moment to think. What she saw was a small grindstone, placed there for the use of the household. Next minute, the stone was going slowly round, with the blade of Marie's knife pressed against its surface.

She went on her way after a time, walking across the moors in a direct line from the back of the Grange. The

night was clear and frosty. The heavy snow-clouds had broken here and there, and through the wide rifts the stars were shining brightly. From snow and stars together there came quite as much light as Marie needed, and she went onward without hesitation, neither knowing nor caring whither her errant footsteps might lead her; knowing and caring only that every step forward removed her so much further from the abhorred prison she had just left. She was not greatly troubled by any thoughts of pursuit; she knew that, in all probability, her escape would not be discovered till daybreak, by which time she would be long miles away; and she had all a lunatic's faith in her own cunning and ability to outwit her enemies. She was the sole living thing to be seen on that white desert. But the loneliness of the situation had no terrors for her, and she went calmly on her way, singing now and again a verse from some *chanson* descriptive of the loves of Corydon and Phyllis à la *Françoise*.

She had left the Grange a mile or more behind her, and now the road, or rude footpath, for it was nothing more, to which she had kept, dipping from the higher levels of the moor, began to tend gently downward. As it did so, the sound of falling water took her ear, and in a little while she came to a deep cleft or ravine in the hillside, at the bottom of which a little stream, whose voice the frost had not yet succeeded in silencing, was brawling noisily. This gash in the fair hillside evidently resulted from some throes of nature countless ages ago. It was from eighty to a hundred feet in depth, and from fifteen to twenty feet wide. Both its sides formed sheer precipices of black rock, as bare and devoid of verdure as on the day they were first laid open to the sky; but the margin of the ravine was fringed here and there with thickets of stunted shrubs. The path traversed by Marie led direct to this ravine, across which a rude foot-bridge had been thrown, to accommodate the inmates of the Grange. For this was the nearest way down to the high-road in the valley that led to certain outlying villages, where the family at the Grange had

sometimes business to transact, and effected, as regards those places, a saving of nearly three miles over the orthodox road; besides which, if there was a heterodox road to anywhere, old Nathan Orchard was just the man to take such road from choice. The bridge over the ravine was of a very primitive character, consisting, as it did, of nothing more permanent than a few strands of rope stretched across, and fastened on each side to the stumps of trees; with cross-strands of thinner rope, over which were laid a few pieces of planking, pierced at the corners, and tied with strong wire to the cords below. As a further security, a hand-rail of stout rope was stretched from side to side, about three feet above the bridge itself. To any person with weak nerves, the crossing of this rude bridge, which began to sway in an alarming manner the moment you set foot on it, was not unattended with danger, seeing that a single false step would serve to precipitate you to the bottom, and leave but little chance of your being found alive afterwards. But such as it was, it had served the family at the Grange for many years, and was likely to last for many years to come.

Marie stepped fearlessly on to the bridge, and pausing when she reached the middle of it, took hold of the hand-rope, and leaning over, gazed down into the dim cauldron at her feet. Eastward, the moon was rising over snow-covered hills, and the clouds fell away before it as it slowly clomb the great azure plains; and, little by little, all the wild features of the scene were lighted up under the eyes of the madwoman. She could see the black riven sides of the gorge, looking as if they had been torn asunder only an hour ago; she could see the glinting of the white water where it tumbled over a ledge of rock some twenty feet in height, and again, as it seethed and bubbled angrily among the jagged granite teeth with which its after-course was thickly strewn. As she gazed and listened, the voice of the water seemed to syllable itself into words intended for her ear alone. "Come to me, come to me," it seemed to say; "here 'tis ever sweet to be—sweet to be."

Nothing more: only those few words, over and over again, in a sort of murmurous sing-song, that awoke vague echoes in her brain. The water spoke to her as plainly as she had ever heard human voice speak. The danger, and she seemed to know it, lay in the perpetual iteration of the words, "Come to me," the effect of which upon her excitable nerves was to work her up into a sort of dreamy ecstasy, which might not improbably culminate in her striving to obey the invitation by leaping headlong from the bridge into the gulf below. She strove, however, to break through the spell that was being woven over her; dragging herself slowly, and with difficulty, as though she were being plucked at behind by invisible hands, from the spot where she had been standing, to the edge of the ravine, and stumbling forward on her knees the moment she felt herself on firm ground.

"Sorceress, I have escaped thee!" she cried aloud. "I will not obey thy summons. Thy silvery voice would lure me to destruction. But hark! I hear another voice. One whom I know well is coming this way, and he must not see me. Hush!"

Still kneeling, and with upraised finger in the act of listening, all the pulses of her being seemed to stand still for a moment, while she waited to hear again the voice which had startled her. It came again, and this time nearer than before. There could be no mistaking whose voice it was. As its familiar tones fell on Marie's ear she forgot all about the water-sprite's invitation—forgot everything except the one fact, that the man whom she hated with all a lunatic's intensity of hate was close beside her, and that there were now no stone walls, no iron bars, between them two. As she realized fully that this was indeed so, a great wave of fire seemed to sweep across her brain; and all at once the moon looked blood-red, and the stars took the same colour; and all her muscles seemed to harden, and her fingers began to grope instinctively for the haft of her knife. There was a thick clump of underwood growing close to the spot where she was kneeling, and partly overhanging the brink of

the ravine. She was only just in time to reach the shelter of these shrubs, when the head and shoulders of a man came into view above the opposite slope of the hill; and the same instant the handsome, crafty face of Duplessis was evanescently lighted up by the blaze of a fusee, as the Canadian paused for a moment in the act of lighting another cigar. As he did so, he spoke again, addressing himself to Antoine, who was toiling painfully up some distance behind his master: "Another little pull, my cabbage, and we shall be on level ground, and then half an hour's brisk walking will take us to the Grange. An hour of this exercise every morning before breakfast, would soon bring down that overfed carcase of thine to something like reasonable proportions."

"Oh, Monsieur Henri," panted Antoine, "but it is cruel, my faith, to drag persons of delicate stomach up these precipices! Why wasn't the world made without hills? It would have been a much pleasanter place to live in than it is now." The glowing tip of the cigar was coming nearer and nearer to the madwoman hidden in the thicket. "But with regard to *La Chatte Rouge*," continued Antoine, "has Monsieur given my proposition due consideration? It is simple, it is safe, it is effectual. Let Monsieur go to Paris and enjoy himself, and leave Antoine to clip the claws of *La Chatte*."

"*Scélérat!*" hissed the madwoman from her hiding-place. "La Chatte would like to drink thy heart's blood!"

The glowing tip was very close now. Duplessis, with one foot on the bridge, and one still on firm ground, paused for an instant to answer Antoine.

"Take care, my infant," he said, laughingly, "that she doesn't claw thine eyes out in the process." With that, he took hold of the hand-rope, and came forward, step by step, slowly and cautiously. The frail structure bent and swayed under his weight in a way that might well have alarmed a man of weaker nerve. He had reached the middle of the bridge, when he looked up suddenly, for the dry branches of brushwood were crackling, as if some one were hidden among them; and then

he saw that he stood face to face with the woman of whom he had just been speaking. She rose before him like an avenging spirit, her eyes blazing with madness, and her white face distorted with an intensity of hate such as no words could have expressed.

"I am here, Henri Duplessis," she said; "here—*comprends tu?* and thy prisoner no longer. The hour of our reckoning has come at last!"

Her fingers were still nervously seeking something in the folds of the shawl that confined her waist; and as she spoke, she moved a step or two forward. So unlooked for, so utterly unexpected was the apparition of this woman, that for once Duplessis lost his presence of mind. As Marie made a step forward, he took one backward; and as he did so, his foot slipped off the narrow plank on which he was standing, thickly crusted as it was with frozen snow. He slipped and fell, with a wild, inarticulate cry of horror. But as his feet slid from under him, he clutched convulsively at the hand-rope, which yielded fearfully to the sudden strain, but did not break; and so he hung, for a few seconds, over the ravine, making desperate efforts to recover his footing on the slippery planks. With a cry that seemed like an echo of his master's, Antoine rushed forward to the assistance of Duplessis; but Marie was at the bridge before him. For one brief instant, the blade of her knife gleamed whitely in the moonlight, and then it came swiftly down on the rope by which Duplessis was hanging, severing the strands one by one with its keen edge. And while Marie's wild maniacal laugh, that was as much a shriek as a laugh, rang shrilly over the moorland, the last strands gave way; and Duplessis, still clinging to the rope, was dashed with frightful violence against the opposite side of the ravine, and falling thence, came down with a dull thud, which chilled the blood of Antoine to hear, on to the sharp-pointed rocks below, round which the angry stream was ever brawling.

Again the maniac's shrill laughter awoke the faint moorland echoes. "Gone! gone! and Marie is revenged at last," she shrieked. "How his eyes glared at me in



the moonlight as he hung by the rope ! I never felt so merry before—never—never.” And with that she broke into one of her *chansons*, and wandered away towards the head of the gorge, as forgetful, apparently, of the recent tragedy, as though no such person as Henri Duplessis had ever existed. While heart-broken Antoine, calling his master’s name aloud, went searching, like one half-crazed, for some path by which he could obtain access to the bottom of the ravine.

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## CHAPTER XL.

### ANTOINE’S NARRATIVE.

TOWARDS the close of a bright February afternoon, about a month after the events related in the foregoing chapter, a man, well wrapped up from the weather, might have been seen toiling slowly through the park on his way to Belair. To the footman who answered his imperative ring at the side-door, he gave a parcel, done up in brown paper, and sealed with several great splashes of red wax, and charged him to deliver the same without delay into the hands of Lady Spencelaugh, and of no one but her. Then adding that no answer was required, he slunk away from the door, and was presently swallowed up in the dusky park, seeming to melt into and become a portion of the dim shadows that were mustering so thickly under the branches of the old trees.

The packet, on being opened, was found to contain Lady Spencelaugh’s stolen jewels : not a single stone was missing. Besides the stolen property, there was a letter addressed to her Ladyship, written in French by Antoine Gaudin, but too lengthy to be given here in its entirety. Of its chief points, however, as explanatory of certain events narrated in the earlier chapters of this history, the following may be taken as a free translation ; although it was difficult, here and there, to make out the sense of the original, owing to Antoine’s execrable writing, and his curious method of spelling, based, apparently, on some phonetic system of his own.

“MY LADY.—In the interests of human nature in

general, and of the late lamented Monsieur Henri Duplessis in particular, it is requisite that the underwritten explanation of certain events, as drawn up by me, Antoine Gaudin, be read with serious attention by your Ladyship. It is a justification to the world of the great heart that has gone from among us. For, alas, Madame, my dearly-beloved master is no more! My eyes are wet as I write these words. But for the moment, I put Sentiment, the generous, the profound, on one side, and will try to set down what I have got to say after the fashion you English love so much—in a ‘business-like way’ (Ah, the droll phrase!)

“Monsieur Henri Duplessis was born in Canada, of a noble French family that emigrated to that country about a century ago. My mother was his foster-mother, and I was his foster-brother; and so I learned to love him, and devoted myself to his fortunes through life. M. Henri’s parents both died when he was quite young; and when he came of age, he found himself master of a handsome fortune, with all the inclination to enjoy it. At that time, he was young, ardent, generous, and impulsive, and as handsome as Apollo’s self. We—that is, he and I—set out on our travels; and first we determined to see whatever the American States could show us that was worthy of our regard. To my dear master, after the studious and secluded life to which he had been condemned during his youth, New York seemed a very Paradise of delights, and he tasted of every pleasure that it had to offer him. Grown tired after a time of city-life, he determined to study nature in some of her wilder moods, and man in some of his more primitive aspects, and we set out for the Far West. It was while we were taking this journey, on our way to the prairies, at a little town in one of the western states, that my dear master first encountered the evil genius of his life in the person of Marie Fevriez. Marie was an actress, born in America, of French parents; young and enchanting enough at that time, I must admit, with a certain devil’s beauty about her, which had for M. Henri an irresistible but fatal attraction. It was on the stage that he first saw her. She

was performing her great part, in a piece adapted from the French, entitled *La Chatte Rouge*, in which she appeared in a flame-coloured robe, and, in a certain dark scene, with real phosphorescent flames playing about her head; and enacted a sort of beneficent fiend, avenging her own wrongs, and those of the good people of the play, at the same time. She was not an actress that would please a first-class audience; she lacked both education and refinement; but she was not without power of a certain kind, and was much run after in the rough country towns where she commonly played.

“Well, my master fell in love with *La Chatte* at first sight. It was not difficult for a man in his position to obtain an introduction to her, and he was not the less fascinated when he saw her off the stage. Certainly, she was a splendid animal at that time. My master made love ardently, proved to her the extent of his fortune, overwhelmed her with lavish presents, and ended by asking her to become his wife, and accompany him to Europe. In a brief three weeks from the night on which he first saw her, they were husband and wife.

“They went to Europe, but I was left behind. Madame did not like me, and I did not like Madame; and M. Henri was so infatuated just then that he was persuaded into giving me my *congé*. They spent five years on the Continent, at the end of which time Monsieur returned to his own country, beggared in purse, and separated from his wife; and, little by little, the wretched story came out. Gambling, and extravagance of every kind, leading by easy but rapid steps to bankruptcy and general ruin; and combined therewith, the bitter certainty that the woman he had loved with such foolish madness had only cared for him because of his money—and to his proud spirit that was the bitterest stroke of all. My master was a man of strong passions—a hot lover and a fierce hater—and he now hated the woman to whom he was chained for life with a depth of hatred equal to the love he had formerly borne her. Of all his fortune, nothing now remained to him but a little farm in a wild part of the country; and thither he and

I now retired from the world, and spent three or four quiet years. Those years at Petit-Maison I believe to have been the happiest of my dear master's life. No longer able to move in that society which he loved so much, and of which he had ever been so bright an ornament, he fell into his new and narrow mode of life with the native cheerfulness of a true gentleman, whom nothing can ever really disturb so long as he retains his faith in himself. He looked after his farm, and read his books; and by way of variety, he and I would often go on long fishing excursions to the lakes. But by-and-by, an aunt of M. Henri died, and left him another fortune—a little one, this time, and by no means equal to the fortune he had spent; and with it came the desire to go out once more into the world, and resume his position in society. Of Madame, we had heard nothing positive for a long time. We only knew that she had taken to her old mode of life, and was wandering somewhere among the outlying states with an itinerant troop of players. Among his friends in Toronto and Montreal, it was, of course, known that M. Henri had been married; but as no one there had ever seen his wife, and as it was known that he had been living *en garçon* for the last three or four years, people concluded that Madame was dead, and, for reasons of his own, my dear master was desirous that such a belief should be universally adopted. What, then, was our surprise and disgust, when, one morning, about a fortnight after our arrival in Montreal, Madame Marie turned up at our hotel, and demanded to see M. Henri. To deny her was out of the question. By some means, best known to herself, she had heard that my master was once more a rich man, and she had come with the intention of doing her best to ruin him for the second time. She demanded one of two things: either to be acknowledged as the wife of M. Duplessis, and received as such by his friends; or else to be subsidised by a sum equivalent to half his annual income, on condition that she kept the marriage secret, and never entered Canada again.

“To no other terms would the harpy listen; and my

master was fain, at last, to accede to her second proposition, and so rid himself of her presence for ever. Having settled everything so much to her own advantage, she set out on her return to the States, but had only left Montreal a few hours when she was seized with illness so severe as to be unable to continue her journey. An address found on her person caused my master to be sent for; and on reaching the hotel where she lay, we found her far gone in a severe attack of brain-fever. She ran a close race for life. Ultimately, she recovered; but the fever had left her with a twist of the brain, which made it doubtful whether she would ever be fit to mingle with sane people again. It seems that there was a hereditary taint of insanity in her family, and now the blight had fallen upon her. My master had her placed in a private asylum, kept by a man of the name of Van Goost; and it was fully understood between them that Madame was to be considered as insane during the remainder of her life. Van Goost, in fact, constituted himself her gaoler for life, for which service he was of course handsomely paid.

“After this little episode, M. Henri, accompanied by your humble servant, set out for Europe for the second time; and it was in the course of this tour that we first had the honour of meeting your Ladyship and the late excellent Sir Philip. Your Ladyship knows how the acquaintance began; how we all came to England together; how my master took up his residence at Lilac Lodge; and what a great favourite he was with Sir Philip. It was some time before this that the brilliant idea had first struck him, which he now began to elaborate carefully. Marie was shut up for life; he himself was, to all intents and purposes, a free man; he would marry an heiress, and make his own fortune and mine at the same time. Ah, the beautiful scheme! it was worthy the genius of M. Henri. The charming Mademoiselle Frederica was the object of his adoration; and he would have married her, Madame, as surely as you read these lines (and what an excellent husband he would have made her! for he had the good, the noble heart), but

for a most unhappy accident. That accident was the escape of *La Chatte Rouge* from the custody of the Herr Van Goost. She got into Van Goost's private room the night she went away, and ransacked his papers till she found a letter containing M. Henri's address in England; and in less than a month from that night, she arrived at Kingsthorpe Station. She was disagreeable at first, and seemed inclined to spoil everything; but ultimately she fell into M. Henri's views, and agreed to pass as his sister, but insisted upon being introduced as such to his friends at Belair. With an understanding to that effect, my master left her. But to introduce this uncultured creature—who required winding up with cognac every morning, and whose manners and conversation had a coarse theatrical tinge—as his sister to the refined and courtly Sir Philip, and to the beautiful miss who was to be his wife, was more than he could bear to do. In this emergency, Antoine proved himself a useful ally.

“On the third day of Madame's stay at Kingsthorpe, M. Henri went to fetch her away, on pretence of taking her to more comfortable apartments in a neighbouring town. He drove her round by way of the old coast-road, as being more lonely and suitable for the purpose he had in view. Half-way along this road, in a curve of the moors, there lay perdue a covered cart, in attendance on which were your humble servant and another individual whom it is unnecessary to name. Madame was evidently distrustful of M. Henri's intentions; and when, shortly after leaving Kingsthorpe, her nose began to bleed, her superstitious nature at once put down that little incident as a bad omen, and she implored him to take her back. But he only laughed at her ridiculous fancies, as he called them, and drove on faster. When opposite the spot where we lay hidden, M. Henri requested Madame to alight, on the plea that something was wrong with one of the wheels of the gig. She got down, and seated herself on the grass, close by the spot known as Martell's Leap. The signal agreed upon as a summons to us who were in hiding was a shrill whistle. The signal was so long in coming, that I grew curious

at last, and popped my head over a hillock to see how affairs were progressing; when what should I see but Monsieur and Madame struggling together like two mad people, and apparently trying which could throw the other over the precipice. One of them was really mad, and that was Madame, as we were not long in discovering, when we succeeded in separating them, which we did only just in time—another minute would have seen one or both of them tumbled from the cliff. Madame's old malady had suddenly come back upon her as she sat there on the grass; and when M. Henri approached her, she sprang up, and seized him by the throat, and swore that she would fling him over the precipice. 'In the sudden surprise of such an attack, I forgot everything except the very proper desire I had to keep my neck unbroken,' said M. Henri, afterwards. 'I forgot entirely that a single cry for help would have brought you two worthy fellows to my assistance; and I believe I should have gone over the cliff in grim silence, had you not appeared just at that last opportune moment which is always provided in plays and romances for the rescue of virtue in distress.'

"It was a raving madwoman, tied tightly down among the straw at the bottom of the light cart, that we took that evening across the moors to a certain house, where her coming as a sane woman had been provided for. Shut up here from the world, she was at liberty to be mad or not, as pleased her best. What would be her ultimate fate, was a question left open for future decision. She was removed from my master's path, and M. Henri was now at liberty to act as though no such creature were in existence.

"Who was the writer of the mysterious letter received by my master one night about two months after Madame Marie had been so judiciously disposed of? That is a question which neither M. Henri nor I was ever able to answer. It was a letter written under a wrong impression—written under the impression that M. Henri had committed a murder; warning him that his crime was discovered, and that the police were on his track; and

advising him to flee while he had yet an opportunity of doing so. He did flee—not that he had committed the crime imputed to him, but because his staying would have involved the discovery to the world of that dark secret which he had been at such pains to hide from it; and, as he afterwards confessed, he lacked the courage to go through such an ordeal. His hopes were crushed at one fell blow. The edifice which he had been patiently building for so long a time had crumbled into ruins at his feet; and there was nothing left for him but to get away as quickly as possible. He lay hid in London for several weeks, and then he ventured down to Monkshire in disguise, and took up his abode for a time in the very house in which his mad wife was shut up; and there I joined him. By this time, his second fortune was almost gone; for, without being extravagant in any way, his expenses had been heavy, and so long as the prospect of a wealthy marriage lured him on, he hardly cared how his money went. But it was now, when the dreadful eyes of poverty were staring him in the face, that the happy genius of M. Henri showed at its brightest. He conceived a brilliant scheme, which, should it prove successful, would rehabilitate his broken fortunes at a single *coup*. You, Madame, as the victim of that plot, are scarcely, perhaps, the proper personage to appreciate its brilliancy; but I will venture to state that no disinterested person could become acquainted with its details, without passing an eulogy on the daring and ingenuity with which its every step was characterized.

“How we sped that night at Belair, your Ladyship knows as well as he who writes these lines, for your two visitors were none other than M. Henri Duplessis and Antoine Gaudin. The survivor of the two now craves your Ladyship's pardon for the violence which the necessities of the case compelled him to resort to. We had succeeded, M. Henri and I, almost beyond our expectations. The gems which my master had on his person when we left Belair that night, would, in that New World to which we were bound, have formed the nucleus of the colossal fortune which M. Henri had de-



terminated on devoting all his future energies to building up; and that he would have succeeded, who that knew him could gainsay? But for him no such bright future was ever to dawn. We were walking across the moors on our way home, when that wretch—that tigress—that fiend incarnate, who with devilish cunning had contrived to make her escape, suddenly confronted my master, who was walking a short distance in front of me; and before I had time to interfere in any way, he was no longer among the living. The precise mode of his death it is needless to detail here. It is sufficient to say that that woman is his murderess; and had I been able to reach her at the time, she would not have escaped with life. My dear master lies buried under the wild moorland. These hands dug his grave, and these eyes were the last that looked on him before the turf was laid over his head that covered him up from human ken for ever. It was better so. All the ‘inquests’ in the world could not have brought him back to life for a single moment; and he will sleep none the worse in that he does not rest under the shadow of one of your churches. I return you the gems and other articles borrowed by M. Duplessis from your Ladyship. Now that his dear master is dead, Antoine cares not to retain them.

“From this narrative, your Ladyship will perceive how largely M. Duplessis was the victim of unfortunate circumstances; and remembering this, you will not fail to do him justice in your recollections. You, Madame, know what he was in society—how handsome, how witty, how accomplished. But the silver lining of his character—his goodness, his generosity, the thorough nobility of his disposition, can never, alas! be fully known to any one but to him who writes these lines—that is to say, Madame, to your Ladyship’s humble and devoted servant,

ANTOINE GAUDIN.”

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## CHAPTER XLI

## A GHOSTLY VISITOR.

GURNEY BRACKENRIDGE, fleeing from the consequences of the deed he had done, made the best of his way to London, and lay in hiding there, in a low water-side tavern on the Surrey side of the river. He had not intended, in the first instance, to stay there more than a few days, but to get out of the country altogether, as soon as he should see an opportunity of doing so in safety. But when, the fourth morning after his arrival in London, he read in one of the daily papers a long extract from a *Monkshire* journal, describing the finding of Jerry's body in the shut-up house—found the afternoon following the lad's death, in consequence of a statement made by Griggs the cobbler, who had heard that Mrs. Winch was making anxious inquiries after her missing son; and when he read the account of the inquest, and how it had resulted in the issue of a warrant for the apprehension of himself, he began to see that his scheme for getting out of the country, at least for some time to come, was not so entirely free from danger as he had at first imagined it would be. A minute and accurate description of his personal appearance would have already been sent to every large seaport in the kingdom: and to go down to the docks in search of a vessel either at London or Liverpool, would be like putting his head into the lion's den. It was true that he had disguised himself in some measure, having shaved off his whiskers, and had his hair cut close, and altered the style of his dress. But he had all an ignorant man's belief in the infallibility of the police, and he felt that his disguise would stand him in poor stead under the keen eyes of a detective in whose memory a certain paragraph of the *Hue and Cry* was busily fermenting.

No; he had better lie quietly by for a few weeks, till something fresher and more important should have engaged the attention of the blue-coated gentry; and then take an opportunity of dropping down the river by some night-sailing steamer, bound he hardly cared

whither. He was not without funds, having brought away with him, in addition to what money of his own he had by him at the time, a hundred and twenty pounds belonging to Mrs. Winch, which had been intrusted to his hands on the preceding day, for the purpose of being deposited by him in the county bank at Eastringham. He knew, from the evidence as given in the newspaper, that a charge of absconding with this money had been brought against him by the indignant widow, and that he was "wanted" by Justice to answer for a double crime. Sometimes he thought that but for that cursed money, which he had put into his pocket on the impulse of the moment when coming away, he would have gone back, and have given himself up, and have borne the brunt of whatever charge might have been brought against him. That Jerry Winch owed his death to him, he could not disprove; but no one but himself knew the reason why the chloroform had been administered; and it would not be difficult to trump up some plausible story to account for having made use of it, which, if credited by a jury, would soften Jerry's premature death from a crime into a mere error of judgment. At the worst, they could but record a verdict of manslaughter against him, which a few months' imprisonment would expiate in full.

It may, however, be doubted whether, in any case, Brackenridge would have had the courage to take a course so apparently straightforward, because, even then, he would have had to piece together some story that would bear cross-examination, to account for Jerry's death; and he felt himself deficient both in the audacity and the invention requisite for such a course. But, now that he had taken the hundred and twenty pounds as his own, such a step was utterly out of the question. Should he be captured, nothing less than a prosecution for felony awaited him.

So Gurney Brackenridge lay in hiding at the dirty little water-side public known as the "Three Fishes," situated in the heart of a frowsy and disreputable neighbourhood. They were not in the habit of letting out

beds at the "Three Fishes," their profits being arrived at by a much readier process. But the landlord was one of those men who cared little how he turned a penny, so long as he did turn it; and when the chemist, wayworn, dusty, and utterly fagged out, put the question to him five minutes before closing-time one night, whether he could be accommodated till morning, he had promptly answered in the affirmative, and had at once turned his sister and two children out of their warm bed in order to accommodate this white-faced stranger. And there Brackenridge had stayed. His bedroom accommodation was of the poorest; his meals were served up in a style very different from what he had been accustomed to at home; and he was waited on by a saucy, slatternly girl, whose ears he felt a longing to box twenty times a day; besides which, both house and neighbourhood were thoroughly detestable. But then—no one ever asked him any questions; no one ever seemed to suspect his reasons for lingering there, one day after another; every atom of that seething mass of humanity by which he was surrounded was so intent on its own bitter struggle for the needful daily crust, or too absorbed in the enjoyment of its own fierce pleasures, to heed him in any way; and he almost felt that he was safe. "Expecting some relations from the East Indies, are you?" said the landlord one day, in reply to some mumbled explanation from Brackenridge of his long stay at the "Three Fishes." "That's all right enough, I dare say; but you may as well understand Bob Jarvis once for all. So long as a man pays his way like a man, and ain't stuck up, I axes no questions. Whether a cove's on the square, or whether he's under a cloud, don't matter a penn'orth to me."

Brackenridge began to find his life intolerably dull. He sent out for a newspaper every morning, which he contrived to make last him till his one-o'clock dinner was brought up; but when that was over, he had no resource left but to smoke and sleep away the long dreary afternoons, which seemed as if they would never come to an end. He never ventured out of doors while the

faintest glimmer of daylight lingered in the sky. But as soon as night had fairly set in, and the "Three Fishes," waking up from the semi-lethargy of its daylight existence, lighted all its lamps, indoors and out, and began to grow jovial, not to say uproarious, after its own fashion, which was far from being a pleasant one, then would the forlorn chemist steal out at the back-door, and tramp the frowsy streets for hours. He rarely wandered more than a mile away from the "Three Fishes," but found his way back to it again and again in the course of each evening's peregrination, or rather to some point from which its lamps could be seen. For no sooner had he left it behind him, than he became possessed by an uneasy sense of the insecurity of its existence ; a dread of fire, or of some other unforeseen calamity, overtaking it while he was away ; which dragged him back, times without number, against his better sense, as it were, that he might satisfy himself with his own eyes that the crazy old building was still intact. He was not without a reason for his anxiety. Behind a loose piece of skirting-board at the back of his bed lay hidden away the canvas-bag containing the hundred and twenty sovereigns which he had brought with him from the country. To have walked about such a neighbourhood with such a sum of money on his person, would have been sheer madness ; and that was the only place of security he could think of.

The last thing every night before turning in, he crept down the short street of which the "Three Fishes" formed the corner house abutting on the main thoroughfare, to look at the river. Not that much of it could be seen on a dark night by looking through the gateway at the bottom of the street, and so across the little disused grain-wharf ; nothing, in fact, but a great patch of blackness with a fringe of fire-flies on the opposite shore. But such as it was, he loved to gaze on it, no one less able than himself to explain the reason why ; and when the tide ran high, and the wind was at all rough, he could hear the melancholy plish-plash of the water against the stone lip of the wharf, and it was a sound

that drove him back to his room with a chilled heart, and dim forebodings of coming ill. But none the less would he go down to the wharf on the following night, and strain his eyes into the darkness, and listen, as though he were expecting the coming of some grim boatman with whom he had an appointment that must not be broken.

Yes, Gurney Brackenridge began to feel the life he was leading intolerably dull. No wonder, then, that he began to look to his old friend, the brandy bottle, for solace and companionship. Under the wing of this trusty friend, he could forget half his troubles, or afford to view them with as much equanimity as though they were the property of some one else. So, little by little, the alluring habit grew upon him, and day by day his power of resistance grew weaker. The landlord of the "Three Fishes" made no difficulty about procuring as much French brandy as his lodger asked for, so long as his privilege of a hundred per cent. profit was not objected to.

One evening, while rambling about, Brackenridge got wet through, and took a severe cold. After that time he lay in bed almost day and night, drinking more than ever, and rarely going outside the house, except now and then to steal down the street, and gaze through the bars for a minute or two at the river, and then creep back with a shiver to his cheerless room. He slept so much in the daytime now that he could no longer rest soundly at night; and his pillow was often haunted by frightful dreams, from which he would wake up in an agony so intense as made him dread the thought of ever going to sleep again. As each morning came round, he told himself that it should be the last of his stay at the "Three Fishes;" that on the following day he would go down to the docks, and secure a berth on board the first ship he could find that was about to sail at once for a foreign port, no matter whither. Surely sufficient time had now elapsed for his little affair to be buried under the pressure of other and more immediate interests, and such a step as he contemplated could no

longer be attended with much danger. Yes, he would go and look for a ship next morning without fail, and get out of this cursed country as quickly as possible. But, when next morning came, bringing with it a nasty headache, and a feeling of languor and utter distaste for exertion of any kind, the soul of his resolution had vanished; and after refreshing himself in some measure with a volley or two of curses, invoked on his own head for his own laziness and lack of purpose, he would make another appointment with himself for the following morning, which would be broken in turn.

"I call him the Bottle Conjuror," said the landlord to his wife one night, in allusion to their lodger. "He has an almighty swallow, and no mistake. And so quiet as he is over it all! No noise, no blether. I like a fellow that can take his tipples without rowing."

Waking up one night from an ugly dream, Brackenridge started up in bed, and gazed fearfully round, as though half-expecting to see some of the horrid shapes with which his sleep had been crowded. With a sigh of relief, he recognized where he was; and scrambling out of bed, he lighted another candle in addition to the one that was already burning, and mended his fire, and put on a few articles of dress. Then he drew his chair up to the blaze, and poured himself out a tumbler of brandy, and sat down to make himself as comfortable as possible till morning. His daylight slumbers were rarely troubled with bad dreams; and after this last experience, he determined within himself that he would turn day into night in future, and go to bed no more during the dark hours. He heard a distant clock strike, and looking at his watch, he found that it was two hours past midnight. How quiet everything was! All the world but himself seemed to be asleep. He would have liked, just now, to go down and have a peep at the black river; but it would never do to disturb the household at such an untimely hour. Suddenly he started, and gazed over his shoulder with straining eyes. Was there not somebody outside trying the casement? But

next moment he laughed aloud to think what a timorous fool he was. "I ought to know by this time," he muttered, "that it's only that blustering old Boreas in want of a night's lodging somewhere. I shall be frightened at my own shadow next."

With that, he took a long pull at the tumbler of brandy. Then, with his slippered feet resting on the fender, and half crouching over the fire, he fell to brooding darkly over his past life, more especially over that string of strange events which had ended by landing him, a skulking thief, at the hostelry of the "Three Fishes."—More brandy, or he should go mad!—A long pull and a strong pull.—Why, he was better already! and could afford to snap his fingers at Black Care, and at the troop of demons that dog his heels, and dance with red-hot feet on the brains of poor sinners. Elixir of life truly, to work such a sudden change in the miserable wretch of a few minutes ago! There were cakes and ale in store yet, even for such as he; and the world was a devilish pleasant place to live in.

Another hour striking by the distant clock. "One—two—three. The Miller of Dee, so jolly was he, he cared for nobody, no, not he."

"Come in." He had heard no noise of footsteps on the stairs, but there was certainly a knock at his room-door.

"Jerry Winch!" He almost screamed the words, as he started up from his chair, and pressed his fingers to his burning eyeballs for a moment, as if to shut out the dread apparition which his diseased imagination had conjured up. But it was still there when he looked again. So he took the half-emptied bottle in his hand, and drained a draught that would have scorched the vitals of any one less case-hardened than himself. "That's better," he muttered. "I don't care a damn now for all the ghosts in the world." There was a wild glare of defiance in his bloodshot eyes, and his hands shook like those of a man stricken with palsy as he waved his arm for the phantom to enter.

"Curse you! why don't you come in?" he exclaimed.



“Don’t stand there, staring at me with those dead man’s eyes. Shut the door after you, and take that chair. No nearer, if you please, or else I must draw back: ghosts aint pleasant companions at close quarters. You look awfully cold.—You always are cold now, and I shall be the same when I’m like you?—By Jove! though, I say, that’s serious; especially for a fellow like me, that never could stand cold. And, I say, Jerry, my buck, why do you have your jaw tied up with that white cloth? It ain’t nice; there’s a churchyard flavour about it that I can’t stomach.—What do you say? It’s the custom of the country where you are now for jaws to be tied up in that fashion? Then it’s a custom that ought to be abolished. Ugh! it makes me feel as if my veins were full of worms, to look at you.—While you are here, Jerry, I may as well tell you that what happened to you at my house was quite accidental—it wasn’t intended, on my soul; and I hope you bear no malice. You don’t? That’s kind—that’s good of you.—I dare say, now, that unsubstantial fellows like you have conceit enough to fancy that they know a heap of things; but I’d wager my two ears that you can’t tell me where I shall be, and what I shall be doing, twelve hours from this time.—What do you say? I shall be down by Deptford Creek? That’s a lie, anyhow; I shall be nothing of the sort. But never mind, my young romancer; go ahead, and tell me what I shall be doing down by Deptford Creek to-morrow afternoon. You shake your head; you won’t answer. I thought that would be a poser for you. Come, now, I’ll put my question another way. How shall I go down to Deptford Creek to-morrow afternoon?—By water, do you say? You are a liar, Jerry! But never mind; tell me what will happen when I get down to the Creek?—There will be a crowd of people, and two men will hook a body from among the mud and piles, and nobody there will know whose it is—is that what I understand you to say? Very interesting, certainly; only I don’t quite see in what way it concerns me. I must have another nip of brandy to take the taste of your last remark out

of my mouth. A drowned body ! Faugh ! let's talk of something else.—You must be going, do you say ? With all my heart, for it is rather late, you know. Next time you pay me a visit, come at a more seasonable hour—by daylight, if possible. And I say, Jerry, do leave off wearing that white cloth round your face ; and there's a cold, fishy look in your eyes that I don't like ; and there's a bluish tinge about your complexion that I don't remember to have noticed before. Do, my dear fellow, pay a little more attention to your appearance.—You want me to go with you, do you say ? Much obliged, but I'd rather stay where I am.—There's something outside you want to show me ? What, in the fiend's name, can there be outside worth my going to look at, at this time of the night ? Oh, you won't stir, won't you, unless I'll go a bit of the way with you ? You're an infernal old nuisance, Jerry, to say so ; and I shan't fret if I don't see your ugly phiz again for a blue moon. I suppose I must do as you want me, or I shall never get rid of you ; so start at once."

Having fortified himself with another pull at his long-necked favourite, Brackenridge was ready, without further preparation, to accompany his ghostly visitor. He rose, pushed back his chair, and with his eyes intently fixed on the figure which his disordered brain had conjured up, he crossed the floor, and opening the door, passed into the corridor outside, which was lighted at its further end by a window that opened direct on to the roof of the next house. Towards this window, through which a white stream of moonlight was now falling, the chemist advanced, still following that something invisible to all eyes but his own.

"Not there, Jerry—not there, man !" he said, in an excited whisper. "That window opens on to the leads, and your way lies down the staircase. What's that you say ? You are going to take a walk on the leads, and I must go with you ? Well, go ahead, my hearty ; G. B. is not the man to shirk anything he has promised. It would have been more mannerly of you, though, Jerry, to have left the window open behind you, instead of

flitting through in that queer fashion, and leaving me to bungle over it as I best can. Ecod ! though, but it blows cool out here."

By this time Brackenridge was standing on the leads of the house next to the "Three Fishes," in the little street leading down to the river. The houses in this street were of one uniform height, and were built after an antiquated style, with dormer windows in the roof, in front of which was a flat, leaded space, and outside that a broad raised parapet. On to this parapet Brackenridge now stepped without hesitation, following his phantom guide. A single false step would have precipitated him into the street below ; but there was this to be remarked, that the state in which Brackenridge then was in so far resembled somnambulism that he was apparently enabled to dispense with the use of his eyes as a safeguard for his feet. He seemed to see nothing save the gliding phantom before him. He looked neither to the right hand nor to the left. He saw nothing of the vast panorama of house-tops stretching out interminably on three sides of him, he saw nothing of the dark river in front of him, towards which his steps were tending ; but with eyes that never winked, or broke away for a single instant from their intense stare at vacancy, and with unfaltering feet, he went onward to his doom.

"A regular wild-goose chase this, and no mistake," he muttered. "Jerry, Jerry, you imp of Satan ! where are you leading me to ? Not up there, you nincompoop ! Well, if we must, we must ; but we can't get much further, at any rate, for the river's just below." While the chemist was speaking, he came to the end of the parapet along which he had been walking, and close before him rose the higher roof of the disused granary, which was built on to the last house of the street, and ran flush up to the river, with a penthouse, and a crane, for convenience in hoisting grain into and out of the barges which occasionally moored alongside. Behind the stack of chimneys belonging to the last house, a small iron ladder gave access to the roof of the granary,

which had probably been put there as a means of escape in case of fire. Up this ladder Brackenridge now mounted.

"Not another step will I follow you, Jerry, my buck," said the chemist, in a positive tone, as he stepped on to the roof; "and it's my belief that I'm a confounded ass for having come so far. Now show me what you've got to show me, and let me go back to my room, for it's awfully cold here. Oh no, of course you don't feel it; you've got no—— Jerry, Jerry! don't! don't!" screamed the wretched man, starting from the spot on which he had been standing, his white, drawn face all distorted with terror, while a light foam began to gather on his lips. With the suddenness of a flash of lightning, the air-drawn phantom which he had been following had changed its semblance. It was no longer the likeness of Jerry in the flesh that he saw before him, but the likeness of Jerry out of the flesh. It was neither more nor less than a skeleton clothed in the habiliments Jerry had been wont to wear—the home-spun suit, the conical hat, the hob-nailed shoes, were all there. There was even a peculiar little self-conceited pose of the head, common to Jerry when the poor simpleton was more than usually well pleased with himself; and, more terrible than all else, there, too, were Mogaddo and Pipanta, writhing and coiling round the fleshless arms and neck of their master, as Brackenridge had often seen them do when alive.

Almost before Brackenridge had time to note this horrible transformation, the phantom swiftly altered its position, and placed itself between him and the ladder.

With another scream, even more shrill than the first one, the haunted wretch fell back. "Oh, Jerry, lad, have mercy, have mercy!" he cried. "What have I done to be tormented thus? I will confess everything; I will go back and give myself up; only leave me—leave me, or I shall go mad!"

Trembling in every limb, the chemist retreated step by step along the flat roof of the granary, and step by step the phantom followed him up, leering at him horribly

from under its conical hat; while the glittering eyes of Mogaddo and Pipanta, fixed full on Brackenridge's eyes, seemed to pierce his brain like spikes of flame. He had either forgotten how close he was to the river, or was heedless of his danger in the great dread that lay upon him. Nearer and nearer to the fatal spot, slowly pursued by the remorseless foe which his own fancy had conjured up.

"Have mercy, have mercy!" he wailed, with clasped hands, but still retreating. "Let me keep my senses; let me have time to——"

Not another word on earth. A sudden fall backward from the roof of the granary; a wild shriek, borne far through the night air; a heavy splash in the swift-flowing river; and Gurney Brackenridge was no longer among the living. That wild cry, and that heavy splash were heard by the crew of the Thames police-boat on duty no great distance away. They were quickly on the spot, and rowed about it for nearly an hour; but nothing more was seen or heard. On the afternoon of the same day—for it was early morning when all this took place—a little crowd was assembled down Deptford way, watching two men drag a drowned body from among the piles and mud, where it had been left by the receding tide.

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## CHAPTER XLII.

P. P. C.

LADY SPENCELAUGH never rallied from the effects of the rough treatment she received at the hands of Duplessis and his accomplice, and the subsequent hour of awful suspense, when death in one of his most terrible aspects stared her in the face. Her nervous system had been over-taxed, too, by the mental excitement of the few preceding weeks, culminating in her confession in the vault. And now that he whom she had too credulously believed to be dead, had made his appearance once more on the scene, and had, indeed, saved her life at the risk of his own, it seemed to the lone, miserable woman that

there was nothing left worth living for, and the sooner she was done with the world and its vanities, the better for every one. The one great scheme of her life was irretrievably wrecked, and all her earthly hopes were drowned with it.

For the four days following the night of her rescue she lay in bed, and refused to see any one but the woman who took her meals; interdicting both Gaston and Martha Winch from entering her room. But on the morning of the fifth day she sent for John and her son.

"I have sent for you, Sir Arthur Spencelaugh," she said, turning on the young man a worn, wan face, "to ask your forgiveness for the great wrong I have done you; and to claim your kind offices for Gaston when I shall be no more. You will believe me when I say that my son was utterly ignorant of his mother's crime. What I did was done to benefit him, but he knew nothing of the base means by which my ends were accomplished. For myself, I think that during the little remaining time that is left me here, it would be a comfort to me to know that you had forgiven me. That you are brave I have had ample proof, and brave natures are always generous."

John had flushed at hearing himself thus acknowledged as Sir Arthur Spencelaugh; but the feeling which evoked the rush of colour quickly died away, and both his eyes and voice were full of grave tenderness as he answered Lady Spencelaugh.

"For whatever wrong or injury your Ladyship may at any time have done me," he said, "I pray you to accept my full and entire forgiveness. Let such wrong be as utterly forgotten between us as though it had never existed. You were my father's wife, Lady Spencelaugh, and that fact renders you sacred in my eyes; and in time to come, I trust that you will allow me to regard you with somewhat of the respect and devotion due from a son to a mother. From this day, try to remember that you have two children. And as for Gaston here," he added, turning towards the sullen young man

standing on the opposite side of the bed, "I admit that it must seem very hard for him to be dispossessed by a stranger of what he has been brought up to look upon as his own. But I hope that after a little time he will learn to look upon that stranger as a brother; and in any case, he will find that I am not disposed to act ungenerously by him."

Gaston pretended not to see the proffered hand. "But the proofs?" he said, in an aggrieved voice, addressing his mother. "Mr. Greenhough told me no longer ago than yesterday afternoon that the proofs of the identity of this—this gentleman, with the person he states himself to be were by no means clear at present. It seems to me that we are getting on a little too fast just now."

"This gentleman is Arthur Spencelaugh, your father's eldest son," said her Ladyship, solemnly, to Gaston. "Whatever further proofs Mr. Greenhough may think proper to ask for, cannot alter that fact. I committed a great crime, Gaston, to benefit you, as I thought; but I now charge you earnestly not to perpetuate that crime by striving to ignore facts which must ultimately be acknowledged by the world. I tell you again, this is Sir Arthur Spencelaugh, and your brother."

"Your son is right, Lady Spencelaugh," said John. "In his position, he has no right to accept anything on hearsay. I will meet him to-morrow, together with Mr. Greenhough, and will lay before them such proofs that I really am the person I claim myself to be, as cannot, I think, be met by any reasonable doubt."

Accordingly, the three met together next morning, when John entered into a detailed account of the result of his visit to America, which account, as far as it now concerns us, may be compressed into a few sentences. John's first efforts had been directed to finding Ike Yarnold, the old squatter, to whose charge he had been committed by Kreefe; and in this attempt he had happily succeeded. The old man recognized John before the latter spoke to him; and when he was made to understand the service that was required at his hands,

and satisfied that no harm should happen to himself, he at once agreed to go before the mayor of the nearest town, and there have his deposition as to the identity of John taken in proper form. The only son of Yarnold now living at home also deposed before the same functionary to the identity of John with the youth who had lived under his father's roof for so many years. Before leaving, the old squatter presented John with two or three faded notes, written by Kreefe, and all referring more or less to "the boy;" which notes had been treasured up by Ike, as the only post letters he had ever received in his life. Encouraged by this first success John's next effort was directed to finding out the particular Mullinsville to which, if the information given him by an old inhabitant of Willsburgh might be relied upon, the Kreefes had removed on their departure from the latter place. Mullinsville, in the state of Massachusetts, proved to be the town of which he was in quest. Here he succeeded in picking up ample particulars respecting the Kreefes. The little property possessed by Barbara at her death had been bequeathed by her to one of the charitable institutions of the town. Her furniture had been sold by auction; and the broker who had purchased the greater portion of it, hearing that an Englishman was making enquiries respecting Kreefe and his wife, brought John a lot of papers which he had found in the secret drawer of an old bureau bought by him at the sale, and which had doubtless escaped the notice of Barbara when she made a holocaust of her husband's letters. Some of the documents thus strangely recovered proved to be of no small value to John. Among them were several receipts given by Yarnold to Kreefe for sums paid him for the maintenance of the boy entrusted to his care. Besides these, there were two or three letters from Martha Winch to her brother, in which the same subject was guardedly alluded to, in connection with several references to a certain "Lady S." The broker made no difficulty about parting with these documents for a small consideration, nor of further annexing to them a written



statement, duly witnessed, vouching by what means they had come into his possession. Armed thus with a double set of proofs, John at once made his way back to England.

"We have by no means a bad case, in a legal point of view," said Mr Greenhough to Lady Spencelaugh, when he went to visit her at the close of his interview with John. "We have possession in our favour, and that goes a long way. The armour of this Mr. John English is by no means armour of proof; there are several flaws in it, and if your Ladyship——"

"No, no, Mr. Greenhough!" said Lady Spencelaugh, vehemently. "I tell you, this young gentleman is the man he professes to be, and you are as well aware of it as I am. Knowing what you do, would you drag this wretched business into a court of law, and call up me to give evidence on oath? How could Gaston ever hold up his head among honourable men again? You have been a faithful friend, Mr. Greenhough; and I thank you from my heart; but this must not be, no, never—never."

And thus it fell out, at last, that Sir Arthur Spencelaugh stepped into his title and estates as quietly and easily as though no one had ever dreamed of disputing his claim to those possessions. The few people who knew the real truth of the matter, found it to their interest to keep a close tongue thereon; and the world, ever ready to welcome a story with a spice of romance in it, was not difficult to satisfy. The eldest son of the late Sir Philip Spencelaugh had been abducted in childhood, and Sir Philip and his wife had been led to believe him dead. But the naughty people who had taken him away, ever so many years ago, having confessed their crime, he had come back, to be welcomed with open arms by Lady Spencelaugh, and to be gracefully bowed into the seat of honour by the chivalrous Gaston, who had at once ceded his new-found honour to the long-lost heir. Thus the rumour ran; and to rumours three-fourths of mankind are ever ready to pin their faith, facts being such awkward things to get at. So the world of polite

society, figuratively speaking, opened its arms to welcome the long-lost Sir Arthur, and would doubtless have welcomed him to its heart also, but that such an incumbrance forms no part of its anatomy.

Lady Spencelaugh lingered on for several weeks, growing weaker from day to day, fading out of life like a lamp that dies slowly, but surely, for lack of oil. Frederica was with her almost constantly; and the bond between these two women, so soon to be severed by the hand of Death, had more strength and vitality in it during these few latter days than during all the years that had gone before. Gaston, restless and moody, lounged in and out of his mother's room a dozen times a day. He was the last person in the house to apprehend the loss that was coming upon him; he never thought otherwise than that a few weeks would see his mother's health as completely re-established as he ever remembered it to have been, for his mother had been a semi-invalid as long as he could recollect; till Frederica broke the truth to him, only two days before the end.

Sir Arthur, too, was a frequent and a welcome visitor in that little room. All that had happened between himself and Lady Spencelaugh in past days seemed as completely forgotten as though it had never been; and the dying woman's eyes lighted up with true pleasure whenever he entered her room.

"What love and tender regard might have been mine through all those weary years!" she said, on almost the last morning of her life. "But I threw them willfully away to grasp at a bauble, which turned to ashes in my hand the moment I thought it was my own."

Gaston had no reason to complain of any want of generosity on the part of Sir Arthur. The weight of debt that had hung like a millstone round his neck was at once cleared off; a liberal allowance was settled on him; and, at his own request, a commission was procured for him in a regiment, which, shortly afterwards, was ordered abroad. With all his faults and follies, there was some sterling stuff in the young man. He

has seen good service already ; has lost an arm, and won a captaincy. Last time he was down in Monkshire, he was lionised to his heart's content ; and had he been matrimonially inclined, he might have had the pick of half the eligible girls in the county. He and Sir Arthur are on the best of terms ; and it was only the other week, in the smoking-room of a certain club, and towards the small-hours of the morning, that Captain Spencelaugh, in a moment of confidence, spoke his mind to a confidential friend as follows : " Tell you what, my boy, it was a deuced good thing for this child that the title and estates went from him in the way they did. I should have made ducks and drakes of the property, as sure as eggs are eggs, and have done no credit to an old name. But look at me now. Having to fight my way up has done me all the good in the world. I've made myself known in a small way ; I've as much tin as I want, and more ; I'm liked by a heap of fellows ; and I've got the best brother in the world. Yes, Arthur is a brother to be proud of, and I *am* proud of him."

Belair was not burned down. The fire did not extend beyond the wing where it originated, and which had been at once picturesque and uncomfortable. A new wing, more suited to the requirements of modern living, and more in accord, architecturally, with the rest of the mansion, rose before long on the spot made vacant by the fire.

A week or two after Lady Spencelaugh's death, Mrs. Winch, having disposed of her business by secret treaty, departed suddenly from Normanford, and was no more seen by the inhabitants of that little town. It was supposed that she had emigrated to New Zealand, where it was known that she had relatives living ; and in the lack of positive information, we may accept this supposition as correct.

Of Jane Garrod, what can be said, except that the master of Belair never ceased to remember how much he owed to her indefatigable exertions in his behalf. In a worldly point of view he could do nothing for either her or Abel, simply because they were in want of no-

thing. The situation held by Abel suited his tastes exactly, and was quite up to the height of his abilities ; while his income, small though it was, was more than sufficient to meet the inexpensive tastes of Jane and himself. Of worldly store or increase they stood in no need ; but Sir Arthur and Frederica could give them what they valued infinitely higher—true friendship, and that was given without grudging. None of the ordinary conventional barriers of society were allowed to touch, however remotely, the bond of genuine friendship existing between the inmates of Belair and the humble dwellers in the little station-house at Kingsthorpe.

Of Antoine the faithful, authentic tidings have come to hand quite recently. Sir Arthur, while in London a few months ago, recognized the ex-valet in the street, without being seen himself, and had the curiosity to follow him for half a mile, till he tracked him into a small café near Leicester Square, of which place Antoine and his brother proved, on inquiry, to be joint-proprietors. Behind the counter, flanked by two huge jars of chocolate and sweetmeats, and effulgent in the lustre of black satin and cheap jewellery, sat Clotilde the imperious, less blooming, and more vicious-looking than of old. Believing, as he did, that Antoine had never been anything more than a willing instrument in the hands of his crafty master, and glad to find that he had now taken to such an honest mode of getting a living, Sir Arthur was well pleased to leave him in peace, and go unobserved on his way.

But one more duty remains to be done before the green curtain comes down, and that is, to bring our hero and heroine together for the last time in front of the stage that, hand in hand, they may make their bow to the audience. That they two—Arthur and Frederica—would inevitably come together, that nothing but death could part them, might be predicated without fear of contradiction, from what had gone before. But it is too late in the day to report any of the little love-passages between them, or set down any of their foolish-wise speeches or tender confessions one to the other. We may, however,

take one last peep at them on the threshold of their new life, before bidding them a friendly farewell.

It is a pleasant autumn evening, the evening of the day of their return from their wedding tour. Sir Arthur and Frederica have dined quietly together without company; and now, just as the sun is beginning to dip behind the great Belair woods, and all the western front of the old Hall glows, and winks, and basks in the golden light as though it were alive, they come stepping through the open windows of the dining-room on to the shaven lawn outside. Plucking here and there a flower as they go, they wind slowly down till they come to a moss-grown wicket, and so pass out into the park, the great reaches of which are chequered with light or shade as the trees stand open or close. A few leaves scattered here and there, on the yellow footway, that fades into a thread in the dim distance, speak of the year's fruition and the fulfilment of many hopes. As the new lord of Belair and his wife pace slowly under the over-arching trees, the ever-busy squirrel peers down at them with curious eyes from the upper boughs; from bracken and coppice the timid hare and the sly rabbit peep out at them wonderingly; all the happy songsters of the grove take note of them; the gaudy peacock on the terrace screams a shrill good-night ere he shuts up his fan, and goes within doors; while the inquisitive deer follow them watchfully from afar.

Frederica's arm is within that of her husband, and she looks up fondly into his face as she speaks. "I am glad we are home again, dear," she says. "With all its attractions, I was beginning to weary of the Continent—beginning to long to be back in my own sweet English nest."

"In which I hope that you and I together will pass many, many, happy years," answers Sir Arthur; and with that he stoops and kisses his bride, believing himself unseen. But a one-eyed blackbird of misanthropical habits, who happens to be taking the air on the branch of an oak close by is a witness of the sweet transaction, and resolves to consult his Brother Rook in

the morning concerning this curious custom of the unfeathered bipeds.

"You remember that day at Naples," says Frederica, "when we sat in the balcony outside our hotel, and discussed our plans for the future—what alterations we were to make here and there; what improvements of various kinds we were to try to effect; the good we were to strive to do in many ways; and the general rule that was to regulate our life and conduct, as far as such things can be regulated for a future of which we know so little: do you remember the evening I speak of?"

"Perfectly," answers Sir Arthur. "I seemed to know you better from that hour than I had ever known you before."

"And all those resolves, hopes, and wishes still hold good in both our minds," resumes Frederica. "But I sometimes fear that the corrosion which wealth and ease so often bring with them will not be without its effect upon us; that our good intentions will lose their edge, and slowly rust into inefficiency; that all our fine resolutions and philanthropical schemes, having no vital principle at the back of them, will never bear fruit, but wither one by one, and die of inanition; and that as you and I grow in years, we shall gradually fade into a couple of good-natured nonentities, living for ourselves alone. Not actively selfish, so long as our own little comforts are not interfered with; charitable to a certain extent, but charitable without trouble; and coming, at last, to a state of mind that will look back upon all the schemes, hopes, and resolutions of which we are brimful just now, as upon the wild day-dreams of two children, who looked out at the world, and all its belongings, through the rose-coloured spectacles of youth and love. Does the dread of such a future never haunt you?"

"Never," replies Sir Arthur, decisively. "I cannot conceive of myself as coming to such a pass, and with you by my side I shall feel doubly armed against it. Genteel sloth has been the ruin of many a promising life. Let us try to make our lives healthily active; let us never be without some object to strive for, something

to look forward to; and if our ends have not been ignoble ones, so much the better for us when the evening shall come.—But see, there is the spire of the little church showing above the trees.”

Frederica pressed closer to her husband's arm, and they walked on in silence. They had dedicated this, the first evening of their return, to a visit to the little church where lay the remains of him they had both loved so well. The old sexton was there ready with the keys. In reverent silence they went in. Frederica's cheek was wet with tears when they came out, ten minutes later. The autumn mists were rising, and the trees looked dim and ghost-like, as they took their way back through the park, neither wholly sorrowful nor wholly glad. So let us leave them.

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